

FORSAKEN GENERATION:
STRESS, SOCIAL SUFFERING, AND STRATEGIES
AMONG WORKING-CLASS PENSIONERS
IN POST-SOCIALIST MOLDOVA, ROMANIA

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Jane C. Schneider

This dissertation examines the lives of working-class pensioners in post-socialist, Galați, Romania. Its central thesis is that the transformation of Romania from socialism to capitalism beginning in 1989 has led to an “epidemic of stress” among retired, working-class people in the city. Marginalized by their age, class and location in the relatively economically underdeveloped region of Moldova, they have been among the hardest hit by the changes brought about with the introduction of neoliberal capitalism. Long familiar with life in a relatively stable economy, they have faced dramatic changes in this area since the revolution, including massive price instability and widespread unemployment. Used to being cushioned by a social welfare system, today they live with the withdrawal of many of the certainties under socialism, including adequate pensions, access to free or low-cost health care, affordable housing, cost-free education and much more. Anticipating that their kin would be near them and their communities would be a reliable presence as they grew older, they have experienced the departure of family for work in distant places and they have watched as many of the ceremonies and ritual practices that once held their communities together have become rarer. This “social suffering” manifests itself in the stress epidemic, pensioners not only experiencing stress chronically but also making sense of the changes they have undergone since socialism by

talking about stress. Retirees respond to these changed conditions by engaging in moral commentary against the people – the newly rich – whom they frequently blame for the decline in standard of living. They cope with the stress epidemic through a range of strategies, including building new social ties, complaining publicly about their difficulties, finding inexpensive or free sources of food, begging, borrowing money, pawning cherished heirlooms and much more. And they mobilize politically to bring about real improvement to their deteriorated situation, testing the limits of their young democracy by organizing and speaking out publicly, sometimes winning as a result of such efforts. In spite of such success, working-class Moldovan pensioners cannot be left to fight on their own to improve their standard of living, however. The state needs to step back into the lives of this disadvantaged population, addressing their needs through concrete initiatives, including offering pensions that meet the cost-of-living, pursuing economic policies that bring more secure employment to Romania and tackling high-level corruption that too often robs average citizens of a higher quality of life.

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Chapter One

Introduction

“Back Then, We Had Salami and Cheese”

On a warm day in June 2004, I sat drinking black coffee in the living room of a pensioner, Alexandra Câmpeanu,¹ who, through a mutual acquaintance, had invited me to her home to share a bit about her life in retirement. Alexandra was 77, and she lived alone in her small, communist-era apartment since her husband’s death some years earlier. She suffered from a number of quite serious health problems, including heart disease, for which she had undergone triple bypass surgery. And she was generally very discontent, telling me that it was “because of the stress” (*din cauza stresului*)² that she was so ill.

Stress was a chronic problem in Alexandra’s life, and it had many sources. One of them was the difficulty of managing basic expenses on a survivor’s pension (*pensia de urmaş*). Each month she earned 944,000 lei (approximately \$29)³ from the state, which was nearly half her husband’s former pension from several decades working at the city’s Wire, Nail and Chain Factory (*Întreprindere de Sârmă, Cuie și Lanțuri*); Alexandra had not worked outside the home and therefore received no state pension of her own. Near tears, she described the challenge of purchasing basic staples on this income given regular price increases and inadequate cost-of-living adjustments to her pension. As a result of this she had all but given up on buying specialty food items her doctors had recommended for maintaining her health. She pointed out that under socialism she had

¹ All names that appear in this dissertation are pseudonyms with the exception of those of public figures. See Appendix A for a list of principal study participants.

² All translations are from Romanian and are mine unless indicated otherwise.

³ This currency conversion is based on the average exchange rate for the year 2004, 32,700 lei to the dollar.

never experienced such difficulty affording food. “We had our refrigerator full of everything,” she said, adding that “back then, we had salami and cheese.” However, since the end of socialism such food items were inaccessible to her.

Expenditures for medication and healthcare services were also a source of stress to Alexandra. Her income did not allow her to purchase much-needed pharmaceuticals, and she explained that consultations with healthcare professionals required out-of-pocket cash payments she could ill-afford – “everybody wants money,” she said, and without it you were poorly treated or not treated at all. Moreover, her encounters with the healthcare system were stressful because of the conditions that existed in medical facilities. She described lengthy waits to see physicians – experiences particularly exhausting given the gravity of her health problems – and poor conditions at local hospitals, such as being placed into beds with unchanged sheets still warm from previous occupants. As with the inflationary food prices, these conditions and the extraordinarily large personal outlays for medical care were features largely new to the post-socialist period. Even if “gifting” healthcare workers had been widespread under socialism, it had reached new proportions in the post-socialist period, according to Alexandra.

Alexandra’s chronic stress stemmed from more than these practical matters. She also experienced anxiety because of strain she felt she placed on her middle-aged daughter. Heavily reliant upon her for financial and social support at a time when her daughter could hardly bear it, Alexandra described herself as a burden on her: “She hasn’t so much as bought a pair of stockings in the two years since I had my operation,” she said. “She gives all her money to me so I can pay the doctor, [and] I also pay for medication from her salary.” Alexandra also felt she “tormented her daughter” (*o chinui*)

by forcing her to make frequent trips between the city on the Black Sea coast where she worked, Constanța, and Alexandra's home in Galați, a distance of approximately 160 km. (100 mi.), in order to take her to the doctor and to provide other care. Exacerbating her distress over the pressure she placed on her daughter were worries about how she would manage when her daughter retired. This was not too far into the future, Alexandra emphasized, and when it happened she would be in an even more serious state, completely unable to purchase medication.

Similar to the stress triggered by the inflationary prices and the healthcare expenditures, Alexandra's anxiety about putting pressure on her daughter was a phenomenon largely new to the post-socialist era. Secure, locally-based employment, wages that kept up with the cost-of-living and social insurance benefits had all become rarer since the revolution, and even though Alexandra never explicitly said her daughter had left Galați for these reasons, her employment in a distant city followed a pattern common among the children of many pensioners in Galați. The employment-aged struggled to find work in Galați or, indeed, even in Romania, or they performed low-waged jobs that made it difficult for them to shoulder the needs of even their own immediate families. As a result, they were stressed over trying to provide adequate care to their aging and often ill older kin.⁴

⁴ Alexandra also suffered from a number of more idiosyncratic stressors. A major one was the early deaths of several of her children, including a son who had drowned at some point in the 1990s as a result of what sounded like dubious circumstances. She also lost her house in the 1990s when the city confiscated and demolished it, forcing her and her husband to move into the apartment in which she resided when I met her. She disliked the place a great deal, telling me that more than anything she wanted to move into a house again because the air in the apartment was stifling and added to her health problems.

Dissertation Objective

Alexandra Câmpeanu's experience of stress as a result of the transformed economic and social landscape of post-socialist Romania was hardly unique. Many other working-class pensioners in Galați shared similar sentiments with me. Collectively, their stories point to an "epidemic of stress" within this sector of the population. Marginalized by their age, social class and residence in Moldova, one of Romania's least developed regions, they have been among the most negatively affected by the demise of socialism and the formation of a neoliberal capitalist economy. Although many other groups of people have been detrimentally influenced by the transformation (see, e.g., Kideckel 2008), Moldovan pensioners have in particular experienced the harmful effects of the changes since 1989. This dissertation examines this "epidemic of stress" among working-class Moldovan pensioners. It argues that this epidemic has erupted within this group as a result of two fundamental shifts in Romania in the post-socialist era. One of these has been the withdrawal of a range of social welfare benefits that were guaranteed under socialism. Since the revolution, free and affordable healthcare services, modest but generally adequate pensions, state-subsidized mortgages, unemployment and disability insurance and vacation and spa benefits have all been cut back or eliminated. Concomitant with this had been the emergence of significant macroeconomic instability in Romania, evident most tangibly in high unemployment rates, low productive output and high inflation. These two major changes have had a profound impact on the lives of working-class pensioners in Galați. Prices for daily necessities that were fixed under socialism have risen in the new market economy, and pensions have failed to keep pace with this change. The basic packet of healthcare services assured under socialism has

become an inaccessible privilege, a development particularly alarming to an age cohort most in need of access to medical care. Middle-aged kin, who under socialism could have been relied upon for practical and social support, have in many cases dispersed to others parts of Romania and to other countries for work, and those who have remained behind are often incapable of giving support to their elder kin because of their own struggles. These and numerous other changes documented here illustrate what the transformation of Romania from socialism to capitalism has meant to a particularly vulnerable sector of the population: a once relatively orderly world has been disrupted on many fronts, a process which has led to the “epidemic of stress” I observed among working-class pensioners in Galați.

This dissertation explores more than the manifold causes behind this “epidemic of stress.” It also surveys the health problems – some specific, like Alexandra’s heart condition, and some general – that working-class people ascribe to the problem of stress. I explain that the attribution of stress to chronic degenerative diseases and acute health conditions is a phenomenon new to the post-socialist era. In contrast, a set of life histories reveals that pensioners blame heavy work loads in industry, agriculture and the household for health conditions they and others suffered under socialism. The at least partial displacement of work or other local, culturally specific etiologies for illness, including supernatural forces, with stress parallels the changeover from socialism to global capitalism. From a country within the Soviet bloc striving to develop its industrial capacity and improve its agricultural productivity, since 1989 Romania has gradually been drawn into the global, neoliberal capitalist system, a process which has created the instability noted above. With this transformation, stress, a relatively universal category –

the word alone is a neologism foreign to Romanian – has come to replace many local explanations for illness.

In spite of the pervasiveness of chronic stress among working-class pensioners in Galați, I show here that few have passively given in to the changed circumstances. Some openly express moral outrage at the wealthy, who they consider responsible for the deterioration in standard of living since 1989. Many others resiliently carry out creative strategies to cope with their transformed society. Yet others apply pressure on authorities through often daring political actions in order to improve their quality of life – and through these test the boundaries of their still incompletely democratic society – or they turn to the ballot box to have their say in Romania’s political and economic future. Unwilling to accept their altered world quietly, older men and women “fight back” in many ways, and, although in some cases this only aggravates their stress, in other instances they experience success as a result.

Dissertation Relevance

Working-class pensioners in Romania, largely overlooked in the academic literature on the region, offer an especially compelling perspective on the transformation the country has undergone since 1989. As a result of their long-term exposure to socialism – most people who participated in this study lived through more than forty years (1947 to 1989) of that system – and their poverty – a condition pronounced among pensioners in the Balkan countries, there being somewhat higher standards of living among the retired in Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary – they are particularly susceptible to the unexpected and often bewildering

political, economic and social disruptions Romania has experienced with the introduction of neoliberal capitalism. More familiar than most with price stability, the retired have found the rise of inflation especially incomprehensible for they are used to nearly a lifetime of access to basic goods and services at little or no cost; the requirement to pay ever-increasing sums of money for food, utilities, healthcare services and much more has thus been a jolting reversal to the elderly. Anticipating their kin would be near at hand, secure and a source of support as they grew older, the scattering of family to great distances or the inability of such kin to manage their own expenses has undermined pensioners' expectations of a relatively stable retirement.

More than their distinctive vulnerability makes pensioners an important group to which to turn our attention. They are also relevant because of the increasingly large percentage of the population they represent; as Appendix B illustrates, from 1970 to 2005 the percentage of people 50 and older has expanded significantly, while that of people 19 and younger has shrunk. Expected to continue following this demographic trend over the next two decades (Copil and Ghenciu 1994, Giarchi 1996, Velkoff and Kinsella 1993), by 2025 Romania will very likely have a population in which greater than 15 percent of the people are 65 or older (Giarchi *ibid.*). Large in itself, this figure does not even represent the true number of pensioners in Romania since many people retire at ages far younger than 65 – the percentage of pensioners will, therefore, be considerably greater than the projected figure. Although this increase is less than those anticipated in several Western European countries and Japan, where the population 65 and older will reach beyond 20 percent by the same year, this demographic trend is nevertheless significant because of Romania's relative underdevelopment and the expenditures involved in providing

services to the elderly. It is also an important change because of its political implications: a growing aging population – now with the power to vote – has the potential to play a major role in the consolidation of democracy in Romania or in the country's drift in other directions politically. As a result, political leaders would do well to understand the experiences and sentiments of this population in order to be in the position to address problems that, left unchecked, could influence the political future of Romania for decades.

These conditions make the study of pensioners in Romania – especially the most disadvantaged among them – significant, yet, as noted above, one is surprisingly hard-pressed to find ethnographic literature focusing on their experiences in post-socialist countries. With a few notable exceptions (Caldwell 2004, Kaneff 2002, Verdery 2003; and see Ikels's 1997 ethnographic account of long-term care for the elderly in P.R. China) ethnographers have not tended to devote their attention to the lives of older people. And those studies carried out in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since 1989 that have focused on older men and women tend to be based on little or no long-term contact with people, making it difficult to assess the validity of the conclusions they draw (e.g., Banoob 1992, De Vos and Sandefur 1999, Giarchi 1996, Gusic 1994, Laczko 1994). This dissertation represents an attempt to begin filling this gap in our knowledge of the elderly in what remains a still relatively under-researched part of the formerly socialist world.

Stress and Social Suffering

The “epidemic of stress” among pensioners in Galați is an example of “social suffering.” Social suffering, a concept theorized by Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997), occurs when people experience health problems as a result of the political, economic and social conditions in which they live. Human maladies such as substance dependency, community and domestic violence, suicide, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and numerous others in many cases exist within particular communities, that is, because of government neglect, poverty, harmful social policies, public health failures and much more (ix). The point of this theoretical perspective on suffering is that health and illness are shaped by the wider contexts in which people live, social problems playing a major role in the sorts of medical problems threatening a particular group of people. I adopt this theoretical perspective on health and illness, asserting that the “epidemic of stress” in Romania is a form of suffering that flows from the social conditions in which pensioners live.

Several other ethnographers have taken this theoretical position in their research, and they persuasively illustrate the impact that social suffering has on health and illness. Ennis-McMillan (2001), for example, shows how the experience of “bodily distress,” common among people of modest means in a peri-urban Mexican community, flows from people’s chronically “suffering from water,” or their struggling on a regular basis with the problem of unreliable sources of water. They chronicle their distress over the insufficient water in an array of complaints, such as feeling nervous and tense, lacking proper hygiene and experiencing thirst. Ennis-McMillan explains the political, economic and social processes that have resulted in the inadequate supply of water to the

community. Reforms enacted following Mexico's joining the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 brought about major reductions in public outlays for community health services such as the delivery of potable water. The Mexican economic crisis in 1994 caused the peso to devalue, inflation to rise, wages to freeze and unemployment to elevate, and because of this people could not pay their water bills. An increase in the sales tax and higher rates for electricity in 1995 as well meant the population became indebted to the water company. The migration of new, wealthy residents to the community added to the problem because of the demand their heavy usage of water placed on the system. It is these circumstances that generate the "suffering from water" and related "bodily distress" shared by people in the community, emphasizes Ennis-McMillan, and, therefore, it is only by correcting these problems that people's "social suffering" can be alleviated.

Similarly, Farmer documents social suffering in Haiti, drawing a connection between two public health problems, AIDS and political violence, and the "larger matrix of culture history and political economy" (1997:272). He presents two ethnographic cases, one of a young woman who died from HIV/AIDS and another of a young man who experienced political violence that ultimately ended his life. They teach us that these forms of suffering were no "accidents;" it was "structural violence" that brought them about. Farmer describes the woman reluctantly becoming entangled in a relationship with a relatively well-to-do man even though he was married because " '[i]t was a way out' " (op. cit.:265) of her family's extreme poverty. He turned out to be infected with HIV, a disease he spread to her. The young man was brutalized by soldiers because they perceived him as unsupportive of the 1991 coup that overthrew Aristide. Important in

both of these cases was not only that the suffering they experienced was “social” in its origins, but also that it was not unique. Farmer underscores that these public health problems were the two most common reasons for morbidity and mortality among young people in Haiti.

Some researchers have focused specifically on chronic stress as a form of social suffering. This includes a team of psychologists (Cohen et al. 1995), who theorize that stress can be triggered by a number of psychological pressures and social demands. Although they point out that the impact of such conditions varies according to the coping strategies and resources people have available to them, all in all they conclude that the chronic stress many people feel from them is disruptive and can contribute to or exacerbate other serious health conditions (see also Cohen et al. 2007), a point I return to below.

Dressler (1991:210-219) supports this argument in his exploration of stress among African-Americans in a small city in western Alabama in the early 1980s. His research was carried out during an economic recession that created two major stressors, stagnate wages and rampant unemployment. These transformed life experiences that would otherwise have been positive to most people, such as childbirth and the pursuit of higher education, making them quite negative largely because of the financial pressures they entailed. More than this, he concludes that a widely shared experience of depression he observed among his informants was directly related to the elevated stress from the economic downturn. With his ethnography, Dressler shows that the suffering his informants faced was multifaceted and came about because of the broader historical context.

Another example of stress as a form of social suffering with long-term health consequences appears in Mullings and Wali's (2001) research among African-American woman in Harlem, New York. They demonstrate the influence a number of environmental, economic and social conditions had in causing prolonged stress among their informants. These included, for example, narcotics trafficking and related violence in their neighborhoods; policing tactics under the Giuliani administration, such as the practice of arresting people for "quality-of-life" offenses but widely disregarding serious crime and failing to provide adequate witness protection to people; housing problems, including the neglect of home repairs by landlords, lack of heat and hot water and high rents; barriers to public assistance programs; and a number of work-related pressures such as schedule rigidity, over-exertion on the job, low income and racism. They theorize that this multitude of stressors contributed significantly to negative reproductive outcomes and high infant mortality rates in Harlem, a conclusion supported by research in the medical sciences soon after completion of their research.

Stress induced by exposure to violence has been further examined by researchers seeking to understand why asthma is more prevalent among youth in some urban communities than in others. What they have discovered is that some parents and other caregivers are so stressed by the possibility of violent activity in their neighborhoods that they keep children indoors, where they are in some cases imperiled by smoking, a risk factor in the onset of asthma (Wright et al. 2004). Through this study, we again learn the multileveled suffering induced by particular social processes.

Stress as an experience of social suffering also appears in research completed outside the U.S. Indeed, this was already shown in Ennis-McMillan's study on water

scarcity, but some research outside the U.S. has concentrated even more exclusively on stress or related concepts than that study does. This includes a set of studies carried out in Central America that have probed the emotional state of “nerves” (*nervios*). Especially illustrative of the point that stress and similar feelings surface because of particular structural circumstances is a study carried out in Guatemala in the 1980s. It showed that “nerves” was occurring chronically in one Guatemalan community. The explanation researchers gave for this was that people’s lives had been disrupted by political instability, an economic recession and displacement because of a severe earthquake (Low 1985:191).

The “epidemic of stress” in Galați is a case of social suffering, too. I theorize that this epidemic has developed because of the “material” and “social” changes that have taken place as a result of Romania’s transformation from socialism to capitalism. I am not alone in making this assessment, other ethnographers as well observing a “stress epidemic” in post-socialist Romania; see, for example, Kideckel et al. (2000) and Kideckel (2002 and 2008) for discussion of stress among workers in Transylvania. In chapter two, a brief history of Romania, I describe the structural changes that have led to this stress epidemic, and in chapter four I provide ethnographic evidence of it. Subsequently, I describe the variety of “responses” people have had to the stressors, including moralizing, engaging in coping strategies and maneuvering politically.

The approach I take to understanding the causes and consequences of this epidemic is thus modeled on what one finds in the research I have summarized here. This does not mean, however, that the social suffering exemplified by the stress epidemic in Romania is perfectly comparable to the experience of suffering from stress that one

encounters in these other ethnographic contexts. That is, although such studies are useful springboards to theorizing the problem of stress, one must bear in mind that the specific conditions causing stress, and the intensity of that stress, from one cultural context to another vary quite a bit. In my view, the epidemic of stress in Romania is among the most severe and chronic because of the sweeping nature of the post-socialist transformation. As I have noted, while under socialism people in Romania were certain their jobs and income were secure; knew they would receive a pension that, although modest, allowed one a decent living; could rely on stable prices at the market from one year to another; managed their mortgages, if housing were not in fact offered them free-of-charge by the state, and their healthcare problems at reasonable expense; and in most cases took comfort that their kin and communities were a reliable source of support, in the post-socialist era this certainty has been washed away. If such fundamental change over such a brief period of time is not indeed unprecedented in recent history, it is at least among the most dramatic examples globally of social, political and economic upheaval in a generation. The stress that has accompanied this rupture has been equally relentless.

There are certainly other ways in which the “epidemic of stress” in Romania could be interpreted. Some may be tempted to medicalize the epidemic, for instance, and with this to explain stress in post-socialist Romania not as social suffering but as an internalized psychological pathology largely unrelated to political, economic and social changes. Such an interpretation of the stress epidemic would be in keeping with a trend in western medicine in the 21st century. As Metzl and Herzig (2007:697) point out, it has become ever more common for “everyday problems” to be pushed into the realm of biomedicine for diagnosis and treatment, eluding the possibility that their social origins

might be examined. What this means, as Rose (2006, 2007:701) indicates, is that, more and more, medical professionals are those who maintain authority over ailments from which people suffer and pharmaceuticals are used to treat them. Indeed, such medicalizing has already reached into the formerly socialist world, recent research in Latvia revealing that psychologists almost habitually prescribe medications to patients experiencing problems such as shyness rather than engage in talk therapy with them and call into question the recent categorization of shyness as a “problem” needing resolution (Skultans 2007).

Taking such an approach to diagnosing and treating the stress epidemic in Romania, and many other health and social problems around the world, would be equally problematic. As Kleinman, Das and Lock point out, medicalizing has the effect of “normalizing social pathology” (x). That is, it results in the interpretation of medical conditions as natural experiences best managed with biomedical intervention rather than as public health problems requiring a far broader array of expertise to solve. Worse than this, they emphasize, all too often such medical interventions end up aggravating the conditions they set out to alleviate. Medicalizing the stress epidemic in Romania would mean, at worst, ignoring the systemic causes of this epidemic and, at best, diverting attention from them, and it could lead to further promoting the treatment of stress with pharmaceuticals. Theorizing the outbreak of chronic stress as social suffering instead directs one to explore the structural and historical roots of the problem, and, as I have emphasized, through such an effort we discover that pensioners and many others are experiencing stress because of the disruptions that have accompanied Romania’s

transformation from socialism to capitalism rather than because they are psychologically unstable.

It is not simply that people are experiencing more stress in their day-to-day lives than they did under socialism, however. It is also that they are talking about stress a great deal more than had earlier been the case. This is not to say that pensioners are talking about a matter lacking concrete dimensions; as I show here, the evidence is clear that the stress they endure is all too real. But it does mean that people have come up with a way to help neutralize their discontent. Now they can pull out the stress “card” to explain the multiple uncertainties in their lives, which helps to make sense of the troubling nature of the changes they have undergone. This conversational “softening” of the stress created by the changes since 1989 is not unusual to Romania; ethnographers doing research in other post-socialist contexts have observed similar processes. This includes Oushakine (2001), who has investigated young people’s use of the symbol of the “New Russian woman” to cope with feelings of disappointment about the loss of the Soviet past and of incertitude about the capitalist future. Oushakine concludes that retreat to this new symbolic category helps people to displace feelings of distress over the instability of a new world order. Pensioners in Galați do the same with their frequent references to stress since 1989.

Indeed, the notion of stress is new to Romania. This is evidenced not only in the word’s absence from dictionaries and grammars predating or appearing in new editions only shortly after the revolution (Cazacu et al. 1982, Levițchi 1965, Panovf 1983, Pop 1991) and its appearance in at least one published after 1989 (Bantaș 1995), but it was also confirmed by several of my informants who said they believed that the word had

entered the Romanian language only in recent years. This does not mean that there are not other words long common to Romanian that people occasionally used to describe feelings of distraughtness over contemporary life. The word *supărare* (meaning “upset-ness”) in particular comes to mind as a close synonym to stress, but most people pointed out that there was at least one significant difference between the two: *supărare* indexed a specific experience or condition troubling a person – one man, for instance, told me about the *supărare* he experienced when trying to look after his ill mother – while stress referred to much more general concerns. What’s more, it was the word stress I heard with far greater frequency than the word *supărare*. Such a generalizable emotion word helped people to make sense of the psychological precipitate from Romania’s broad-scale transformation.

Somewhat less clear is the meaning behind the foreign origins of the word stress. The word is not Romanian; in the Bantaş dictionary from 1995 it even appears in its English, rather than Romanian, spelling, which would be *stres*. It is difficult to know with precision how the word entered Romanian, but there is good reason to argue that this came about because of people’s increased exposure after 1989 to western media and to Westerners, concomitant with Romania’s movement toward neoliberal capitalism. This meant that people were increasingly exposed to the word stress just as the economy and society were being remade along new capitalist lines. The stress concept common in the West has, in other words, served to explain the psychological uncertainty people have felt as Romania abandoned socialism. This suggests that the experience of stress is universal, similar in any place where capitalism is the choice economic structure. As I have indicated above, in my view this goes too far. It remains important to pay attention to the

peculiarities of capitalist restructuring from one place to another and to note the massive differences between living in the capitalist West and living in a society like Romania that has only recently experienced economic and social transformation of such dramatic proportions. Yes, stress “works” to explain how people feel in both contexts but the emotions people experience and the conditions they face in each are not identical.

Today people in Romania are not only experiencing more stress and talking more about stress than under socialism, but they are also increasingly attributing health problems to the stressors impinging upon them. I already gave an example of this at the beginning of the chapter, and below I present a couple more cases. These ethnographic insights are important for many reasons. For one, they show that people more and more believe stress can have a holistic impact on the human body, affecting many organ systems at the same time. In other words, people do not universally refer to the contribution of stress to one or another specific health problem; instead, in many people’s minds it plays a role in a wide variety of physical and mental ailments. All together, these references to the repercussions of stress on the health of the human organism suggest that pensioners and others perceive Romania’s transformation to be negatively influencing people’s bodies and minds. Older men and women know that the post-socialist disruption is causing them stress and that this stress is making them ill; they are aware, that is, that their “social suffering” is making them sick.

The references to the health consequences of stress are important also because they show that a relatively more “universal” understanding of the etiology of illness is displacing much more “local” beliefs about why people suffer particular health problems. People are much less likely today than in the recent past (as described in Kligman 1977)

to accuse witchcraft or sorcery for their illnesses, even though I did come across a few examples of this. For instance, a young man told me with conviction that people could die from a brick being hurled by a ghost or phantom from a haunted house (*o casă bântuită*), and later I give another example of an informant's belief that sorcery was making her and her son sick. Such references to witchcraft and supernatural force were quite rare, however. At the same time, some people continued to blame poor health on drafts (*curente*), a belief long existing in Romanian culture that I touch on again below. Others talked about the onset of health conditions because of poor diet and alcohol consumption, both interrelated with the stress epidemic as I also show here.

But the most striking change in people's beliefs about the etiology of illness is evident in comparing pensioners' descriptions of life before 1989 with those of life in the post-socialist era. As the life histories in chapter three reveal, people often attributed disorders they and others experienced under socialism to work pressures – as one woman, Victoria Dobre, points out, her nervous psychological state in that period flowed from the fact that “there was just too much work.” In other words, it was not stress from living in a vastly changed economy and society that made her unwell under socialism; it was the challenge to successfully complete tasks in a number of different domains at the same time that caused her to become “agitated” then. A similar evaluation of health conditions under socialism was shared by many pensioners. This does not mean that pensioners never explain their present-day ailments with reference to the work they performed or the conditions under which they worked during socialism; nevertheless, an evident alteration has taken place in how people explain many of the diseases they and others now suffer.

Other ethnographers have observed such a change from more “local” to more “global” etiological framings of health and illness. This includes Halliburton (2000), who points out that the manner in which people in Kerala, India describe many of their psychological disorders has changed from attributing them with great frequency to spirit possession to much more often using English words such as “tension” and “depression” – there, too, a more “local” understanding of the etiology of illness is being displaced by a much more “global” and modern psychological interpretation. Once again, this does not mean that the experience of “depression” in Kerala is equivalent to that in every other context where people use this word to explain their emotional state; one should always be watchful for local peculiarities in the experience of illness even as one sees that a more global framing has taken over.

This etiological transformation in Romania does not mean that people have entirely abandoned culturally specific treatments for their physical and psychological afflictions. Many continue to make use of medicinal plants to treat ailments. I came across many examples of this in my research, a few of which I note below. Furthermore, research has shown that after socialism people in some parts of the country began in significant numbers to turn to witches for guidance with health problems (and for other reasons), a practice which Chelcea and Lățea (2003) argue has been provoked by the immensity of political and economic change. My landlady Daciana Niculescu was one such person. One day she came to my apartment with a magazine called “The Mystery of Magic” (*Misterele Magiei*) that was featuring the services of a witch named Claudiu (*Vrăjitoarea Claudia*) in the nearby city of Brăila. Seeing the magazine, I was prompted to ask Daciana whether she had ever gone to a witch for help with anything. She said

that she had and that she knew other people who had done the same in some cases because of medical concerns. Lindquist (2006:23-40) describes a similar explosion in magic and healing services outside the mainstream public healthcare system in post-Soviet Russia. Although she emphasizes that such services were by no means new to the post-*perestroika* era, Lindquist explains that they have proliferated significantly in good part because of the financial gain practitioners receive from offering their services. Few pensioners in Galați described turning to witches or other practitioners of magic for assistance with their health problems I suspect precisely because the cost of such visits would have been prohibitively expensive to them. Moreover, such “alternative” therapy would have transgressed their Orthodox beliefs, and perhaps they were reluctant to reveal themselves “superstitious” in front of me.

In spite of gaining these fascinating glimpses into relatively particularistic beliefs about the causes of poor health and the more “local” practices people took up to manage their medical conditions, it was pensioners’ collective movement toward “stress” to explain how they were feeling that most captured my attention. This trend pointed directly at the “social suffering” pensioners were experiencing since 1989 as a result of the many unsettling changes to their lives. They were psychologically stressed because of the “material” and “social” transformation of their world from socialism to capitalism – the “epidemic of stress” was a window onto how they were experiencing and how they were feeling about their greatly changed society.

The Setting

Arriving in Galați in 2004 to carry out fieldwork, I saw the city in a new light, quite literally. It was a bright January day, and as the train approached Galați from Bucharest to the southwest, brilliant sunshine streamed low over the horizon and illuminated the city. I beheld – looming chimerically across the flat land from many miles away – what appeared to be two structures that were differently colored, one of them bright beige, the other shimmering black and gray. The details of both were unclear from such a distance; for a while I did not even think I was seeing Galați. Only as the train drew nearer to the city would it become perfectly clear that these seemingly fantastical structures were actually two of the most concrete imprints the socialist regime had made on the city of Galați. In this section I describe the physical and human geography – including the beige and gray “structures” – of the urban area where this research project took place.

The city of Galați, sixth largest in Romania with approximately 300,000 inhabitants (Giurescu et al. 2003:965), is located in Moldova (in English, Moldavia), an independent principality prior to joining another principality, Wallachia, to form the state of Romania in the 19th century. Galați sits on the northern bank of the Danube River, a waterway which has played a major role in shaping the city’s economic fortunes. The Siret and Prut Rivers flow into the Danube to the immediate west and east of the city, respectively, the Siret originating in the eastern Carpathian Mountains and the Prut forming the contemporary border with the Republic of Moldova, the now independent country that had been a Soviet republic. A patchwork of canals constructed during the socialist regime to provide irrigation to farms and a large artificial lake named Brateș also

lie east of the city. The county (also named Galați) of which the city is the seat extends northward. Topographically more variegated especially in the county's northern half with small hills and dales than the expansive, flat, fertile Bărăgan Steppe that stretches to the south, the land is nevertheless very productive, allowing agriculture to be carried out on a large scale. Farmers grow sunflower, from which the most widely used cooking oil is produced; corn, from which a very popular dish known as mămăligă⁵ is made; wheat, from which white bread is produced; soybeans and a variety of vegetable crops. There is one major growing season in the region, its continental climate resulting in cold winters with generally low-to-moderate amounts of precipitation; cool-to-warm springs usually with reliable rainfall especially in May and June (although historically the region has also suffered from droughts, a major one in 1947 experienced by many people I met – some descriptions of it appear in chapter three); very warm-to-hot summers, the month of July commonly referred to as “the oven”; and cool autumns.

The architectural makeup of the city is very mixed; the very different historical periods through which Galați has passed are evident in the diverse structures one can observe. In or near the center are structures predating the Second World War, including city hall, the prefecture, the University of the Lower Danube (*Universitatea Dunărea de Jos*), several schools, the main public library, a few small manufacturing plants, some private homes, a theatre, museums and other buildings. They share the distinction of having survived in whole, or in part, the bombing raids the city underwent during the war, but their historical provenance is in fact quite varied. For example, a small, much-revered Orthodox church (*Biserica Precista*) sitting on an embankment near the Danube

⁵ Mămăligă is made by combining cornmeal with boiling water, some people adding salt. It is occasionally also served with cheese or egg.

River dates from the seventeenth century, while several of the other prewar structures were built only in the 1920s and follow French architectural styles, as was the practice in many urban areas in Romania during that period.⁶

Juxtaposing the relatively small number of prewar structures is a vast selection of buildings constructed during the socialist years. These include a large number of apartment buildings from four to twelve stories in height – the beige “structure” I observed from the train. In the majority of cases these were constructed from the 1960s to the 1980s to provide housing to people allowed to migrate from rural areas, most often from villages to the north, for work in the city’s expanding industrial sector.⁷ These apartment complexes, common throughout the former Soviet bloc, are a testament to the socialist system’s success at developing civilian infrastructure: the apartments provide adequate space for a small family unit, and they are structurally sound enough to withstand some of Galați’s natural vagaries. These include periodic earthquakes – an intense tremor rated 5.8 on the Richter scale (some estimates being even higher) in October 2004 violently shook the five story apartment building in which I lived and alarmed residents there and in many other parts of the city but did not cause any significant damage – and Galați’s location in a geologically unstable area.⁸ Thus, although such apartment complexes in the former Soviet bloc are often ridiculed in the West for their drabness (a criticism that in itself is not entirely accurate since they were

⁶ Romania has a historically close relationship, especially culturally, with France. Its influence architecturally is especially evident in the capital, where many structures were built on models from that country.

⁷ As described in chapter two, there was, however, a lag in the construction of this housing in comparison to the development of industrial facilities, making commuting a very common feature of life in the socialist period.

⁸ A couple of apartment buildings a short distance from the Danube were, however, evacuated during my research because they began to experience major crevices in their foundations and walls. These were believed to be caused by gradual shifts in the land from seepage of water from the river.

often painted with geometric and other designs), they at least were a major practical accomplishment that continues to serve the population.

In addition to building these apartments, workers under socialism constructed large-scale manufacturing plants (more on this and the rest of the economy below); an expansive county hospital and several polyclinics; state administrative offices; retail complexes, including a large department store at the time called “Modern” and marketplaces; schools; hotels; cultural centers and museums; sports facilities; and restaurants (for more see Brezeanu 1980, which offers a patriotic tour of the architectural achievements in Galați under socialist rule).

Adding to the architectural *mélange* is an assortment of structures built since the end of socialist rule. These include oversized, often gated, single-family villas; several new, large apartment buildings, one of which, very close to the Danube, houses many executives and their families who have immigrated to Galați from India to work in the metallurgical plant now owned by the steel magnate, Lakshmi Mittal; a large Baptist church; private clinics; banks; cafes and restaurants; and supermarkets, retail stores and kiosks. Some of these structures were built in short order. I observed the fairly rapid construction of a small bank on a main avenue near my apartment and the quick addition of a floor to an apartment building in my neighborhood. The latter project created palpable consternation among building residents because they thought the new floor’s weight would eventually cause the building to collapse. Other structures were built more slowly or their construction appeared stalled; the shell of a large apartment building next to a traffic circle from which a main artery led to the city center, for example, remained untouched for the entire duration of my research.

The economy of Galați has a firm industrial base. The most prominent example of this is the sprawling metallurgical facility – the black and gray “structure” I saw from the train – formally known as LNM Ispat-Sidex. One of Eastern Europe’s largest, it was constructed over a decade beginning in the mid-1960s and consists of six major manufacturing units. Galați was chosen as the site for the plant in part because of its location on the Danube.⁹ Deep and broad as it passes along the city, the Danube permits ores and finished products to be transported with ease in and out of “*Sidex*” (as, from the socialist period, most still refer to the plant). One can have a glimpse of this process by standing on the embankment overlooking the river: on most days to the west a swarm of enormous vessels sits waiting to deposit or collect goods, an illusory quiescence overshadowing the scene. Despite significant reduction in the industry’s workforce (from c. 27,000 to 19,000) following privatization in 2001, *Sidex* remains the city’s largest employer.¹⁰

The city’s second largest employer is the Damen Shipbuilding and Repair Yard, which one can see by turning to the east on the same embankment from which *Sidex* is visible. Founded before the First World War, its ownership and capacity have over time changed even more than the metallurgical plant’s, most recently falling partly under Dutch ownership. In addition to these industrial giants, the city is dotted with a number of other factories. These include a large facility (The Consolidated Construction and Ironwork Enterprise – *ICMRS*) built in 1960 for the production of various iron and steel works and concrete products; food processors, such as a bread factory (*Galmopan*), a

⁹ Its placement in Galați may have resulted from the country’s leader at the time, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, originating from Moldova. He was originally from the city of Bârlad, north of Galați.

¹⁰ *Sidex* was sold to the global steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal for 70.6 million dollars. Mittal agreed to invest 350 million dollars in the heavily indebted industry over the following decade.

factory for dairy products (*Galacta*) and a sunflower oil producer; textile mills (some of which, however, have gone bankrupt since 1989); a paper manufacturer and other industrial plants. This concentration of heavy and light industry makes Galați one of Romania's chief manufacturing hubs. As illustrated here, this has shaped the class structure of Galați – relative to other urban areas in Romania of comparable size, Galați has a disproportionately large working class – and influenced the city's political life. It has also in general given city residents higher incomes than people in other parts of Moldova, several counties to the north, particularly Vaslui, having even greater poverty than Galați. Still, the population of the city remains poorer than those in other regions of the country, especially Transylvania and the capital.¹¹

Vibrant wholesale and retail sectors contribute to the economy of Galați. A wide variety of foodstuffs, household wares, clothing, shoes, electronic goods and other items can be purchased in many city neighborhoods. In some cases these goods can be bought at reduced rates, secondhand stores offering by the kilogram clothing often donated by people in Western Europe, and other stores selling goods at flat rates. One, which for a time was very popular, sold clothing and cosmetics at 38,000 apiece, or just over \$1.00. A vast assortment of electronic wares is available at a number of chain stores. Characteristically, these entice people with installment plans – most items are far beyond the reach of people's budgets – that do not require down payments or co-signer guarantees – stipulations colorfully posted on store windows to attract clientele.¹² In

¹¹ It is worth noting here that the underdevelopment of Moldova relative to these other regions has an influence on people's attitudes toward the region. Moldova and Moldovans are generally looked down upon by people in places like Bucharest, an example of domestic "orientalizing" that is not unique to Romania.

¹² Pensioners, however, are generally excluded from making such purchases, a practice reflecting their economic marginality. Interest rates on most items are very high, which contributes to some people's feeling entrapped by the installment plans. Compelled to consume once out-of-reach goods made available

addition to the wholesale and retail sectors, scores of pawnshops – one newspaper article reported more than 70 in the city (Zegrea-Grinberg 2004:7) – numerous currency exchange bureaus and businesses offering bus transport to Italy and Spain make up the economy of the city. At the same time, many people are employed in public services, including health care, utilities, education, transportation, policing, the courts and a variety of city, county and national bureaus.

The people of Galați are ethnically uniform in comparison to the populations that make up other urban areas of similar size in other parts of Romania, most Transylvanian cities in particular being much more diverse. Most people identify themselves as Romanian, with much smaller groups of people identifying themselves as Roma/Gypsy,¹³ Moldovan,¹⁴ Ukrainian and Russian. The city's relatively homogeneous ethnic profile is complimented by religious uniformity. Most people, and therefore most churches, in Galați are Romanian Orthodox, one of several Eastern Orthodox religions that ultimately formed out of the 1054 schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. Still, there is a popular Roman Catholic Church near the city center, and some Protestant sects have taken root as exemplified by the new Baptist church mentioned above. A synagogue constructed prior to the Second World War sits near the center of Galați, and a Jewish

by the plans, people also feel stuck by the requirement to hand over money each month to electronic goods retailers. Several of these retailers were in my neighborhood, and I regularly observed lines of people in them waiting to pay bills, a revealing twist to the phenomenon of standing in line common in Romania in the 1980s.

¹³ I continue to use the word Gypsy in recognition of the fact that some Roma I know prefer to be called Gypsy (*Țigan*) and reject the use of Roma.

¹⁴ Ethnic Moldovans are people from the Republic of Moldova, the former Soviet republic. Variation between the Romanian spoken in that country and in Romania is one basis for this ethnic identity. Some argue that the Romanian spoken in the Republic of Moldova is so different from that spoken in Romania that it be called "Moldovan" (*moldovenesc*). The roots to this argument are deep. Under Soviet rule, leaders eager to undermine Romania's claim to the republic emphasized differences between the variety of Romanian used there and that in use in Romania (Verdery 2008: personal communication). With little surprise, this matter is complicated by variations in the Romanian spoken in Romania, differences in accent, vocabulary and syntax existing between the Romanian common to Galați and that common to other regions.

cemetery lies just north of the city, but today the Jewish population is very small.¹⁵

Reflecting this ethnic and religious homogeneity, the majority of people who participated in this research project identified themselves as Romanian and Orthodox.¹⁶

Background to the Research Project

A complex set of academic and personal roots contributes to the materialization of any anthropological research project, including this one. This section describes the background to the research proposal on which this dissertation is based and discusses how the project was initially framed. I also explain why I decided to engage in fieldwork specifically among pensioners in Galați.

Among the deepest roots to this project was an experience I had teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in public schools in Ploiești and Bucharest from 1995 to 1998.¹⁷ Although I did not carry out ethnographic research during those years, exposure to daily life offered me my first insights into the society's troubled transformation from a socialist republic to a fledgling capitalist democracy. One consequence of this process, which I recurrently observed especially during trips through the center of Bucharest, was the presence of older men and women begging. In heavily traveled areas such as University Square (*Piața Universității*) and Roman Square (*Piața Romană*) I often saw

¹⁵ Jews made up a major portion of the region's population prior to the Holocaust, their numbers significantly reduced during the war through genocide and migration. I briefly describe this history below.

¹⁶ It was fascinating that a number of people periodically told me that they had heard the schism between Western and Eastern Christianity would soon be mended. I was not entirely certain of the meaning behind this assertion, but it appeared to be a metaphor for Romania's increasing absorption into western spheres of political and economic influence rather than a church reality.

¹⁷ My position was with the Open Society Foundation's "Soros Professional English Language Teaching (SPELT) Program," one of several initiatives in the former Soviet bloc financed by George Soros. I spent the first year teaching at a vocational (*industrial*) high school in Ploiești, a city approximately one hour north of Bucharest, which is one of the centers of Romania's petroleum industry. I then spent two years at a bilingual (*bilingv*) high school in Bucharest.

pensioners alone or in small groups along sidewalks or subway entrances holding icons and signs requesting money for medication or other needs. I as well had contact with a number of pensioners in the large apartment complex in which I resided in the city's southwest (a neighborhood named *Drumul Taberei*). One elderly woman, whose husband I believe was no longer living, came to my apartment a few times requesting small amounts of money. Another older woman approached me one day at the building entrance to ask if I would like to purchase some of her family's kitchen appliances. I befriended a retired couple in the building, who periodically requested small loans to buy food and from whom I gained among my most intimate insights at the time into the everyday battle simply to get by. This included observing the expenses the woman incurred when her husband died and she needed to pay for his funeral and subsequent ceremonies to honor him. Called *pomeni* (plural for *pomană*), these ceremonies will be discussed in many parts of this dissertation.

As a doctoral student in the CUNY Anthropology program not long after the experience teaching EFL, I carried out library research on a number of topics involving Romanian history and society. Among them was the public health crisis that had surfaced in the post-socialist period in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that was causing the premature deaths in particular of middle-aged men. I learned that a number of changes were responsible for this crisis, including the rapid disinvestment in public health infrastructure throughout the region after the end of socialist rule. Although under socialism the health care systems in most countries competed for scarce resources with other economic sectors – in particular, industry and, especially in the Soviet Union beginning in the 1960s, arms development – and debatably never received sufficient

funding from the state, they suffered far more significant shortages with the demise of socialism, and this was one of the major reasons that morbidity and mortality had risen in the 1990s.

An applied anthropology course gave me the opportunity to explore this crisis further, including the measures being undertaken to tackle it. Among them was health system reform, which was underway in many countries across the region, including in Romania. It involved dismantling state-funded and -regulated systems created under socialism and replacing them with systems modeled on several operating in western industrialized countries; Germany's "Bismarckian" system was an especially popular choice in many Eastern European countries (Marree and Groenewegen 1997).¹⁸ One key initiative of health system reform was the replacement of direct government control with the semi-autonomous administration of health systems by insurance funds. New mechanisms for financing health care were also devised: in Romania, although the state continued to supply the bulk of funds to the system, employers and workers also began to be taxed to pay for health care. Certain groups such as pensioners were exempt, at least temporarily, from making official payments into the system.¹⁹ For workers, the tax amounts to seven percent of a monthly salary (see Apostoiu 2002 for details).

Reformers also sought to eliminate the practice of patients paying out-of-pocket for healthcare services since it subverted the state's continued commitment in the post-socialist period to provide a basic package of healthcare services free-of-charge to the

¹⁸ See Barnighausen and Saneborn (2002) for a concise, informative history of the German healthcare system.

¹⁹ When I was conducting research, pensioners were not officially required to contribute financially to the healthcare system although earlier in the post-socialist period a percentage of their pension went to it, and the government elected in November 2004 (the center-right National Liberal Party-Democratic Party or *PNL-PD*, *Partidul Național Liberal-Partidul Democrat*) proposed resuming this requirement after they came to power.

population – including primary care services, laboratory testing, surgery and emergency care. Although, as noted earlier, this practice was not new, many people observed that it had reached new heights since 1989, cash payments having become increasingly common for many healthcare services (Bara et al. 2002, Marcu et al. n.d., Wisbaum 2001). The expectation was that the new financing mechanisms would reduce and ultimately eliminate the practice of under-the-table payments. As described later, this was wishful thinking, however, because healthcare financing continued to be inadequate for various reasons years after these funding reforms were initiated. Finally, reformers placed emphasis on improving preventive care. The relative inattention to prevention under socialism was, indeed, widely criticized, many arguing that it was a fundamental reason for the stagnation or, in some cases, the decline in life expectancy and the rise in chronic degenerative diseases in many of the region's countries beginning in the 1960s (Dolea et al. 2002, Mureșan 1999, Tulchinsky and Varavikova 1996). While these changes to public healthcare systems were being launched in Romania and other former Soviet bloc countries, parallel private healthcare services began to flourish, allowing the well-to-do to gain care outside the state system. Very few people I came to know in Galați ever used the private system because they could not afford it (see Vladescu 2000 for an overview of the reform process in Romania).

Interested in learning about the impact of health system reform on a disadvantaged sector of the Romanian population heavily reliant upon healthcare services, I proposed research on the effects of the process on pensioners. This required completing several steps. First, I needed to find an appropriate field site, which I began by writing to a number of private and state institutions providing services to older women

and men. I described my research intentions and asked if they would be interested in meeting to discuss my plans. Wishing to conduct research in an area of the country that was relatively understudied anthropologically and that was comparatively underdeveloped, I only wrote to organizations based in the south and the east. Several organizations replied to the letter, and in summer 2002 I made a reconnaissance trip in order to visit each respondent's institution. Most of them proved to be inappropriate sites for launching the project because they were inactive, lacked suitable infrastructure or maintained goals that did not correspond well with the objectives of the research.²⁰

An exception to this was the Pensioners' Foundation in Galați, a non-governmental organization that received some of its financial support from city hall.²¹ It had been active for several years. I was impressed by its commitment to serve marginalized older people in the city and surrounding areas by monthly distributing packets of food; providing cost-free medical consultations with a physician's assistant (*asistentă medicală*), who also distributed pharmaceuticals when they were available; sponsoring a recreational center; giving shelter to a homeless woman (who had moved out by the time my research began) and offering a few other services at low cost, such as shoe repair. On my visit, I met approximately eight staff members, one of whom took me to the recreational center to introduce me to visitors. It was filled with about twenty men and women, who were generally hospitable. The men, who sat separately from the women, were especially enthusiastic about discussing healthcare issues. One man

²⁰ One organization suffered at least one problem common to NGOs in Romania: a lack of steady financing. Although filled with up-to-date electronic equipment including a television, computers and VCR, no staff or visitors were present at the organization during my visit with the director, which took place late one morning on a weekday. Another association had never received significant outside funding; I met with the director in her private home.

²¹ The name is a pseudonym. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to the organization as "the Pensioners' Foundation" or simply "the Foundation." I have altered a few characteristics of the organization in order to protect its identity.

explicitly said that he and his colleagues had been harmed by the “toxic” environment of the city’s metallurgical plant in which they had worked.

The Foundation thus appeared to be a fitting place for getting the project off the ground. Foundation administrators ultimately agreed with this once I made it clear that I had no intention of carrying out research on the Foundation itself; that is, I told them I would concentrate my research primarily on the people it served and limitedly on the role it played in this but not at all on the internal operations of the organization. I proposed to investigate several interrelated matters, which from my still limited point-of-view seemed critical. Chief among them were whether pensioners’ access to healthcare services had improved as a result of the reforms; whether out-of-pocket payments for such services were as commonplace as quantitative research concluded and, if so, what the implications of such outlays were; what kinds of health care were available to people and what their opinions were of its quality; and what forms of social support pensioners could rely upon to assist in managing their healthcare needs.

I explore some of these matters in detail here – the problem of out-of-pocket payments in particular receiving attention. As many ethnographers experience, it was not long after I began the project that I realized, however, that a number of other unanticipated topics were also important to follow. In the next section I briefly describe the experience of carrying out the research, including discussion of the methods I used.

Conducting Fieldwork in Galați

This dissertation is based principally on participant-observation in a wide range of social contexts over approximately one-and-a-half years (January 2004 to February 2005;

May 2005 to July 2005 and June 2006). I supplement knowledge gained from participant-observation with insights from approximately 25 semi-structured, in some cases recorded, ethnographic interviews, some of which were held over several meetings. Most people who participated in the research were members of the working class. This does not mean that the participants in this study were homogeneous in terms of class; differences existed among them in their former occupations, incomes, education and family support. Most participants were originally from rural areas, being born and raised and in some cases having lived part of their adulthoods in villages located in most cases north of Galați. This section discusses my experience of carrying out fieldwork. It describes the settings in which the research took place and the activities in which I joined, and it begins to introduce some of the people I met (more on this in chapter three). My motivations for expanding the project beyond the original proposal are also explained.

The Pensioners' Foundation proved to be a fruitful point of departure for the project. When I returned there in January 2004, the executive director invited me to participate in activities at the recreational center, and people who attended the center hospitably obliged my request to join their activities. In my first activity there four men asked me to enter a game of rummy. Being somewhat inexperienced at the game, initially I only observed the other players, one man patiently instructing me on the rules and suggesting strategies for winning. After several visits and in the absence of a team's fourth competitor, I advanced to the level of independent player, participating in rounds that would proceed for hours until the center shut at about noon. These interactions were intently focused on playing, with little casual conversation going on.

It was not only through this game playing that I began to become a center member and to enter the lives of many of the people who went there but also through several other social activities. I talked casually with people; participated in dancing that occasionally erupted when a visitor's preferred song was played on a station featuring ethnic music to which a television in the center was nearly always tuned; attended parties held on various occasions such as International Women's Day (March 8), International Pensioners' Day (October 1) and a Foundation volunteer's²² retirement (Raluca Barbu, whose life history is partly recounted in chapter three); joined two trips sponsored by the Foundation to the city's Botanical Garden, a sprawling facility with a greenhouse, museum, aquarium and large outdoor gardens; and a three-day Foundation excursion to monasteries in northeastern Romania.

Soon after arriving in the field I began teaching English at the center two hours per week at the executive director's request, an experience lasting about two months. In my opinion it was only a partial success, however, because the Foundation did not make the classes available to anyone who was interested in them, and more than a handful were, allowing only employees, volunteers and a few other people to join in. Nevertheless, it was another context in which I got to know people and to learn about their lives.²³ Meanwhile, some visitors to the center invited me to their homes and introduced me to their relatives, gestures a couple of administrators at the Foundation made as well. One Foundation employee (Constanța Iorga, a woman in her thirties who became a friend) put me in touch with several pensioners who did not attend the center,

²² There were at least four groups of volunteers at the Foundation, the members of which in many cases were retired women. I made few observations of their activities, leading me to believe that the position, which was not remunerated, was more symbolic than real.

²³ In one lesson, e.g., I asked participants to describe their "likes" and "dislikes." Several mentioned disliking arguing with people, suggesting the phenomenon was prevalent in Galați.

including Adrian and Felicia Tomescu, who lived a rather secluded life socially. Over time, I was invited to the wedding of a Foundation employee's daughter; asked by an administrator to speak at a local high school; and invited to an employee's university reunion. I was also occasionally asked by Foundation people to join them at cafes and pubs. I accepted as many such invitations as time permitted, prioritizing those which seemed most relevant to my project and to my broader understanding of Romanian culture and society. Ultimately I moved in with a family I met through the recreational center. This was the Dobres – Victoria, her husband Serghei and one of their sons – with whom I stayed when I returned for follow-up research in spring 2005 and June 2006. The experience both fortified my understanding of life among pensioners in Galați and was very rewarding personally.

Concurrent with pursuit of social contact through the Foundation I proceeded to become acquainted with people in contexts entirely unrelated to the organization. This included getting to know my landlady, Daciana, a woman who lived with her parents and daughter following a divorce from her first husband.²⁴ The apartment actually belonged to her brother, who like many others had left the city with his family when he lost his job because of restructuring at *Sidex* following its privatization. Shortly after I arrived in Galați she invited me to a *pomană* commemorating a beloved family friend who had died twenty-five years earlier, an experience I return to below. Daciana periodically came to

²⁴ I acquired the apartment by going to a rental agency in the city, which was a somewhat disconcerting experience. After a broker (a man in his twenties) showed me the apartment, which sat in a slightly more upscale neighborhood than those in which my research largely commenced, it was quickly clear I could not decline the offer he and the Daciana made despite my requesting time to think it over. Almost immediately after our meeting, the broker and an assistant I had not yet met came to the hotel where I was staying, more or less demanding I take the offer and requesting a fee for arranging it (less than \$200). I agreed and then counted out bills as they hovered over me in my room. A subtly sinister encounter from my perspective at the time, in the end it was a gripping insight into a manner in which business was conducted in Galați. Showing his goodwill, the broker called me on a few occasions after I had moved in to the apartment to see how I was doing.

the apartment to make meals for me for a small fee.²⁵ I visited her home on a few other occasions besides for the *pomană*, interviewing her father Gheorghe, and I got together outside the apartment with her and her friends from time to time.

Interacting with vendors at several of the city's markets, including a small one in my neighborhood, Galați's Central Market (*Piața Centrală*) and one popularly known as "the Moldovan Market" because many retailers were from the Republic of Moldova and its prices were somewhat lower than at other places, was another means for learning about life in Galați. Contact with one man, Radu Popescu, was particularly friendly. We conversed a bit during visits I made to the Central Market, where he sold household wares, and he eventually invited me to lunch with family and friends. My neighbor Ana Dinescu, a retired woman who lived alone following her husband's death a few years prior to our meeting, became an acquaintance too. Greeting one another from time to time along a path I regularly traveled between my apartment and the market or bus stop, one day she invited me in for homemade liquor. Before I left she encouraged me to stop by periodically, an offer I accepted. Another context for meeting people was one of the city's main cemeteries. Pensioners went there to accept the *pomană* offerings people made on behalf of their deceased family members. With one woman, Lenuța Moldovan, I developed a particularly close relationship. We conversed around the cemetery lot of a young girl she had never personally known but whose grave she said she tended in anticipation that the girl's family would pay her, and she invited me to her family's

²⁵ Her offer to make meals provided an early glimpse into beliefs about gender. As a man, I was perceived as incapable of doing my own cooking. At the same time, her suggestion to cook for me indicated that the apartment was an extension of her household. Her occasional, unannounced visits to the place further showed this, and they also gave me ethnographic insight into how people in Galați defined "property" and "privacy."

home, which I accepted. These and several other contacts I made outside the Foundation figure prominently here.

I as well engaged in research with public officials and medical professionals. This included meeting with both the Executive Director and the Department Head (*Şef de Serviciu*) of the county branch of the Department of Pensions and Other Social Insurance Benefits (*Casa Judeţeană de Pensii şi Alte Drepturi de Asigurări Sociale*); the President and General Director of the county-level Health Insurance Authority (*Casa de Asigurări de Sănătate*); the Executive Director of the local Public Health Administration (*Direcţia de Sănătate Publică*); directors of two nursing homes caring for severely mentally and physically ill older men and women; and two primary care physicians, or “family doctors” (*medici de familie*). The knowledge I gained from some of these encounters, especially those from the meetings with the *Şef de Serviciu* of the Department of Pensions and with one of the family doctors, is included here. Data I obtained from visits to the county and national offices of the Statistics Institute are also presented.

When I introduced myself to people I told them I had come to Galaţi to carry out research on the impact of the recent reforms to the healthcare system. Although most people were uninformed about most of the fine details of the reform process, it was telling that nearly everyone expressed dismay over the state of the healthcare system. For example, Mihaela Florescu, a retired doorkeeper (*portar*), responded exasperatedly when I asked her about healthcare reform: “you tell me: what has changed!?” she all but shouted at me. Few people, in other words, were observing positive improvements – instead, they talked only about the health system’s decline. They confirmed that cash payments were widely expected for services in the public healthcare system; described

purchasing medical supplies needed in their own care, one woman joking that the time would come when people would even have to buy cotton swabs; complained about the need to wait to see doctors and pointed out that medication compensation programs provided limited coverage for needed pharmaceuticals. The public health system in most cases was, however, the only option available to them for formal healthcare services; costly private treatment was, as noted above, out-of-reach to most people I came to know. As a result they relied heavily upon the public system to treat medical conditions.

In the meantime, people were telling me a great deal about other matters important to them. I learned that some of them had children living in other parts of Romania or abroad because they had lost jobs, had been unable to find employment or had been too poorly paid for their work in Galați. Others had children living in the city who could not easily provide for their immediate families; as a result, in some cases the relationship between my informants and their children had grown distant or strained. People repeatedly described experiencing difficulty paying for basic household expenses: a refrain I grew used to hearing early in my stay from nearly every pensioner I met was the list of necessary expenditures – food, electricity, heating, building maintenance²⁶ – they struggled to afford. Several told me about not being able to manage costs for different ceremonies and rituals, in particular *pomeni* (the death rituals), but also weddings, funerals, and so on. Others described worrying about petty crime in the city, often saying that there had been far greater security under socialism.

In learning about all of these concerns, I was impressed by the rate with which people mentioned feeling “stress” (*stres*) in connection with them. That is, many men

²⁶ Building maintenance includes cleaning, painting and repairs, the monthly cost of which is divided and shared by all households in an apartment building.

and women of working-class background and of different ages said they were experiencing chronic stress because of these and other changes in the post-socialist period. Believing it was important to pay attention to and to document these experiences of stress, I broadened my research to focus not only on people's troubling encounters with the healthcare system but also on many of the other conditions that were creating anxiety in their lives.

Reading here that poor pensioners and their kin were describing the "stressful" circumstances of their lives may give some readers pause. Surely they were doing this, one might counter, because of the advantages they anticipated from it. I was, after all, a relatively privileged person from whom they may have believed they could benefit materially and who they may have imagined could bring significant change to their lives. All this talk of stress, in other words, was just a way to capture my sympathy and to gain something from me. Other readers may reject the conclusion that Romanian pensioners are truly stressed by claiming that the practice of complaining about the dire state of one's life is merely cultural; that is, people told me they were experiencing chronic stress because this was a time-honored practice in which everyone in Romania engaged, and, therefore, it was not actually the best reflection of the true nature of people's lives. One might even attempt to support this position by pointing out that under socialism complaining to state officials, or going "in audience" (*în audiență*) as it was called, was one of the few ways to interact with communist officials before 1989 in order to get something done. Later, I as well consider complaining a strategy some pensioners used to improve their situation, noting in the discussion that younger informants, too, were

wary about the validity of pensioners' frequently expressed dismay over the condition of their lives.

I largely reject, however, analyses of the stress talk in Romania that concludes it was all about grabbing my attention or that it was simply a culturally resonant practice. Although in some cases it was possible that informants were trying to persuade me with their lamentations and it is undeniable that such complaining had a cultural dimension, I am convinced that there was something materially and socially "real" behind all the talk of stress I encountered. Ries comes to the same conclusion in interpreting the litanies she heard in the Soviet Union during perestroika. Talk about how bad life in Russia was featured prominently in her conversations with members of the intelligentsia. Such talk followed a number of culturally-specific patterns that Ries lays out in detail, but in the end she accepts that the talk was more than about making cultural meaning; in many cases, real hardship lay behind it (1997:15-19, 83-125). The same appears to be true of Alexopolous's (1997) research on the "ritual lament" in Stalinist Russia. This was the practice common among the "disenfranchised" (*lishentsy*) – people who after the 1917 revolution had been condemned as class exploiters and stripped of rights such as employment and pensions – of approaching officials with appeals in order to be "reinstated." Many of these appeals assert that the person is blameless for his or her social position and describe the desperate situation into which he or she has fallen since becoming disenfranchised. Although Alexopoulos does not question the validity of the accounts, at least some of them do appear to reflect real loss as a result of being cut out of the Soviet economy. In other words, the lamentations seem to portray actual experiences of desolation in a profoundly changed society.

But what makes me so certain that all the talk of stress was not a ploy to persuade me or that it was not simply a way of being in Romanian culture? My sentiment flows in good part out of the length of time I spent in the field, including as mentioned living with a family, and the fact that I developed long-term relationships with many of my informants over the months I carried out research. Most of this time I spent engaging in conversations with people, which was just about the only “recompense” I gave anyone except for the small gifts of fruit, chocolate or coffee I usually brought on my visits. These “small gifts” were hardly meaningless. Some of them, I knew, could be used as “bribes” during visits to the doctor, for instance. Still, I largely do not believe that people told stories of their difficulties to get me to give them more even if in some isolated cases I perceived a degree of hyperbole in someone’s account of how bad things were and that this was directed at me. I make clear when I believe an informant was exaggerating his or her dismay over something for my “benefit.” Explicit requests for money were also few, and, as I describe later, in one of the two cases the money was promptly returned on the day the person, Felicia Tomescu, said she would give it back. In the other case, I refused the request for many reasons, including that the amount of money for which the man, Dumitru Ungureanu, asked on one occasion was too much for me to afford. In neither case did I sense that the person had ever embellished his or her problems in order to provoke my sympathy and to get the loan. Furthermore, my relationship with Dumitru continued even after I turned him down.

In my conversations with people, it was they who talked about the “stress” in their lives; only very infrequently was I the one who would initiate use of the word. And the flood of references to stress did not abate over time – if anything, as I grew closer to

people, stress became a centerpiece of our conversations. This talk of stress was legitimized by insights from conversations with the professionals in healthcare and administrative fields, including people working at the Foundation, by media coverage of pensioners and by the activism in which retirees participated in order to change their situation. All of this confirmed that the references to stress for the most part were not meant to manipulate me and that they were not simply an interesting cultural and linguistic practice with limited substance; instead, they taught me that I was confronting a serious public health epidemic with roots in the economic and social disarray following 1989. In other words, the stress pensioners talked about was truly being felt.

My research involved more than learning about stressors in people's lives. Several objected sharply to the enrichment of some people in the post-socialist era, often describing them as morally decrepit. Many pensioners described or I observed an array of strategies they carried out in order to cope with the stressful conditions in their environment. A few were also politically active, seeking to bring about change to their society in various ways, including demonstrating, voting, attending rallies, approaching public officials at their place of work and so on. These judgments, the coping strategies and the political activism were a very important part of the lives of the pensioners I was coming to know – and they illustrated that a new society had emerged in the post-socialist years, one which demanded new responses.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Chapter two is a brief political, economic and social history of Romania from the interwar period to the present day. It

concentrates in particular on the socialist era, emphasizing the expanded availability of social welfare benefits, the comparative economic security and the maintenance of kinship and community through ritual practices that generally characterized life in those years. Even during the global economic downturn beginning in the late 1970s, and despite the government's highly problematic policies in the 1980s that were aimed at reducing its debt to foreigners partly because of this downturn, the system remained relatively intact. This stability is contrasted with the economic and social instability of the post-socialist era, a central argument of the chapter being that the transformation since 1989 has triggered the "stress epidemic" I observed among pensioners in Galați.

The third chapter provides an overview of the people who participated in the research. A set of "model" life histories that concentrates on the socialist period is presented for two women and two men. While these reveal the diversity in education, occupational history and retirement income among working-class pensioners in Galați, at the same time they show many of the similarities among retired people of this social class background.²⁷ These include their having experienced the rigors of quite hard labor in many different sectors of the developing Romanian economy but their also having received the benefit of certain employment that paid well enough to meet basic needs and even to increase consumption. These histories give examples of the improved access to health care, education, housing and much more that members of this social class gained under socialism. Furthermore, I describe the pride that most pensioners expressed about

²⁷ This is not to say that pensioners in Galați form a distinct social class. There are significant class differences among retired people in the city, as is true throughout Romania. I had contact with a number of retired intellectuals, but I have largely omitted discussion of their experiences under socialism and in the post-socialist period because in general these pensioners were more privileged than many of the working-class retirees I came to know and because their interpretations of life in Romania varied from those expressed by many of the informants I include here.

their lives and their accomplishments, arguing that this has much to do with the improved conditions they faced under the socialist regime. In noticeable contrast, the life experiences of a younger woman and man I present at the end of the chapter begin to show how much life has changed from socialism to post-socialism, the uncertainty of employment and lack of access to social welfare benefits experienced by both coming to the forefront. I point out how disappointed and unfulfilled younger working-class people feel regarding their lives.

The “epidemic of stress” is the focus of the fourth chapter. Many of its causes are explored ethnographically. I examine the stress provoked by the distinctly “material” challenge of budgeting for basic necessities that many working-class pensioners face, and I present a number of “social” stressors that pensioners experience, such as living separately from kin, struggling to meet ritual obligations to the deceased and worrying about crime in many of the now uncertain spaces in Galați. The chapter includes an analysis of pensioners’ interpretations of the impact of this “epidemic” on both their personal health and the health of the wider public. Their beliefs about the negative public health effects of stress are compared with recent studies in the medical sciences so as to show that Romanian pensioners have increasingly adapted an etiology for health problems that is standard in western medicine – the etiology of “stress.” I conclude, as noted above, that this new etiology is based on “real” experiences; in other words, it has come to be used because of the conglomeration of disruptive changes since 1989.

Examination of the causes of stress and its implications in post-socialist Galați continues in chapter five. In this case, the focus is on the stress propagated by encounters with the healthcare system (beyond waiting for services), which as noted above typically

involve having to pay out-of-pocket for services that by law are free of charge. I use this stressor as a catalyst for discussing moral commentary among pensioners since many people told me about their feelings toward the necessity of making such payments. While one may at first expect to find people outraged by it, the ethnography shows that the majority of older men and women and their younger kin typically feel very ambivalent about such “corruption,” rarely, in fact, using this word to refer to it. Their sympathies lie with medical professionals in part because they are aware of the difficulty many of them face living on low salaries and because of the lifelong relationships they have had with them. I contrast this ambivalence with the opinions pensioners express about those they believe are the truly corrupt, the newly rich and powerful. These are the people they often blame for the impoverishment that pensioners have experienced in the post-socialist period, and they therefore have strong feelings about the need to tackle corruption among them.

The sixth chapter explores the strategies older men and women employ in order to cope with their fundamentally transformed society. These, on the one hand, reveal the remarkable resilience of pensioners living in very difficult circumstances; in these strategies we observe the flexibility of a sector of the population often stereotyped as not particularly open to anything new. On the other hand, they remind us of the marginality of this population; we see in these strategies that it is mostly individual effort, rather than support of the state or of kin and community, that pensioners rely upon to manage basic needs and to meet social obligations. As a result, many of the coping mechanisms of older men and women turn out to be yet additional sources of stress, the exact problem the pensioners are trying to eliminate from their lives.

Political activism among pensioners in Galați, and in other parts of the country, is the focus of the seventh chapter. It describes the collective efforts pensioners carry out in order to draw attention to their concerns. There has been, I point out, a groundswell of social movement activity among pensioners in recent years, a sign of the increasing consolidation of democracy in Romania and as such a contribution to one of the few positive changes that has occurred since the revolution. But in exploring the influence this activism has had on improving the quality of life among pensioners, I conclude that its impact has been somewhat limited. Political leaders offered concessions to pensioners in the run-up to the 2004 national election that in good measure were directed toward winning their votes but have not really improved their lives for the long-term. This does not mean, however, that the voting power of pensioners is viewed as unimportant to political leaders; I show that other political parties tried to garner their votes by focusing on the problem of corruption, about which, as mentioned above, so many pensioners express deep concern. This trend of trying to win the favor of the elderly will continue, I argue, given the unprecedented demographic transformation the country is undergoing such that pensioners over the next generation will constitute an increasingly large portion of the population and hence the electorate.

The conclusion reemphasizes the key theme of stress from the disruptions in the post-socialist era. It also reiterates the causes pensioners attribute to the problem and the implications of their analyses. Pensioners' responses – in the form of coping strategies and political activism – are also mentioned again. The dissertation concludes by pointing out that working-class pensioners in Galați will continue to be one of the most forsaken sectors of the Romanian population unless the government turns its attention to this

population and commits resources that will truly bring about improvements in their lives.
Pandering to their consternation over corruption in order to win their votes is not enough.

Chapter Two

A Brief Political, Economic and Social History of Romania since the Interwar Period

Introduction

The commemorative *pomană* feast that I went to at my landlady's house shortly after arriving in the field at first seemed to be very well attended. So many people were invited that the Niculescus could not even sit everyone around their large living room table. Because of this, they decided to serve two meals, the first for a priest, his deacon and about ten friends, the second for about eight kin. I was asked to join both meals, the elaborateness of the entire event, which I describe in chapter four, at first glance suggesting that ritual life in Galați was thriving.

There were some close family members missing from the feast, however. Daciana's younger brother, Mihnea, the owner of my apartment, could not come because, as mentioned above, following the loss of his position after *Sidex* privatized about two years earlier, he had moved for work to Timișoara, a city in western Romania approximately twelve hours away by train, his wife and daughter later joining him. It was only many months after the *pomană* feast that he would make a rare visit to Galați, prompted by a major roof repair the apartment needed, of which he was required to approve in person, an experience I also return to below. Absent such needs, he came back to the city very infrequently. Thus, what on the surface appeared to be a successful *pomană* commemoration was in fact incomplete: unlike in the past, it did not fully reconstitute the Niculescus' kin ties because of Mihnea and his family's absence.

I begin this brief history of Romania with this ethnographic snapshot because of the glimpse that it gives into one of the major reversals that has occurred during the

lifetimes of the pensioners who participated in the research. The gathering of close kin for rituals such as *pomană* commemorations, relatively certain in the socialist era and earlier, has grown much rarer since 1989 because of the loss of employment security, the failure of wages to keep up with the cost-of-living, cutbacks in social welfare and the scattering of kin to often distant places for work. It is thus much more common today to find kin missing from ritual gatherings – or for such events not to be held at all; this was, after all, one of the few *pomană* feasts I observed in the field – than had been the case in earlier years. Under socialism some people engaged in labor in other, distant parts of the country and in the 1980s many people had difficulty meeting the material demands of such ceremonies because of the austerity measures the government enacted in that period – even so, kin gathered relatively consistently to mark life cycle events.

The “epidemic of stress” among older men and women that is the central theme of this dissertation is a result of these changes since the 1989 revolution, including the dispersal of kin. In order to fully appreciate this epidemic, it is necessary, therefore, to present a sketch of the historical periods through which today’s pensioners have lived. With such an account, one can begin to have an understanding of what the post-socialist transformation has meant to older men and women since it will, for one, illustrate the breadth of the rupture that has occurred on many fronts to a socialist society that, although imperfect in many ways, provided a degree of stability and an improved standard of living to the majority of people in Romania.

The Interwar Period (1919-1939)

I begin this history with the interwar period rather than the socialist period, however, and this requires a certain amount of additional explanation. I do this not so much because most of the people who participated in this research project were born during that period; after all, most of them had few, if any, lasting personal memories of those years, and the handful they shared with me typically reflected a childhood nostalgia that surely belied real-life experience at the time. I begin this history with life in the interwar years – and particularly life in rural areas because as mentioned in the introduction it was from villages in Moldova that most of my study participants originated – rather because a glimpse into that period helps one to understand even more fully what the transformation to socialism after the Second World War meant to the Romanian economy and to society. In other words, its impact is made clearer with knowledge of this earlier history, but one also learns what remained relatively constant across the two eras. All of this sets one up for an even more complete realization of the scale of the rupture from socialism to capitalism beginning in 1989 than one would gain from alone juxtaposing those two periods. In addition to this reason for exploring the earlier history, there is another, secondary motivation for which I delve into it. As I pointed out in the introduction, Romania is unique in comparison to many of its European neighbors and because of this we should turn our attention to the country. This distinctiveness is revealed by examining its formative years as a nation-state.

During the interwar period, the overwhelming majority of the Romanian population lived in rural areas – 77.8 percent in 1920 and 81.8 percent in 1939. Most of these people, that is more than 90 percent, were peasant farmers (Hitchins 1994:336,

339). They worked the land, which in some case they had received as a result of the land reform process carried out after the First World War (more on this below), using traditional equipment. Tractors, ploughs, fertilizers and other resources were scarce compared with Western Europe and the U.S. (Berend 1985:194-196); only a few well-placed peasants had the means to purchase them. Although the number and total area of large agrarian estates was less than before the war, monocropping continued to predominate in most parts of the country as it had before the reform. Grains were the favored crop on most holdings, especially medium-sized ones (5 to 25 hectares or 12 to 62 acres) but also small ones (less than one hectare or 2.5 acres). Corn and wheat were particularly popular, 65 percent of production being dedicated to them. Some of this was sold to other countries, but the amount of grains exported in the interwar period was in fact considerably less than had been the case before the war. This decline occurred for many reasons. For one, grains were now distributed domestically to territories newly acceded to Romania at Versailles after the war.¹ In those regions, cereal production was only moderate, making it necessary to supply grains to the population there. Moreover, studies show that the cultivation of cereals dropped marginally because of the land reform process (Roberts 1969:55-66).

For most people living in rural areas in Romania during the interwar period, material conditions were poor and the standard of living was low relative to those in most other European countries. This was especially the case in the eastern and southern

¹ These territorial gains had been significant: the area under Romanian sovereignty more than doubled from 85.6 to 195.7 thousand square kilometers (53.5 to 122.3 thousand square miles), and the population grew from 7.5 to 17.6 million people (Mazower 2000:125). The Trianon Treaty, signed in 1920 following the First World War, added territory from the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary, including Transylvania, the Banat, Crișana, Maramureș and southern Bucovina, and it allowed for the official recognition of Romania's acquisition of Bessarabia from the Russian Empire during the war. Southern Dobrogea was also returned to Romania in 1919 via the Neuilly Treaty (Hupchick and Cox 2001:35).

regions of the country, including Moldova.² Villages lacked infrastructure that had reached urban areas of the country: paved roads were few and electricity was not widely available. Despite a campaign to build ditches and to plant trees in villages in the 1930s, little progress was made with this, especially in the south and east; in addition, public sanitation services were largely absent although, given their poverty, it is unlikely that rural inhabitants had much beyond organic waste to dispose of.

Most rural inhabitants were very limited in the household purchases they could make. The most common item they bought from local sources was alcohol followed, with decreasing frequency, by tobacco, matches and hardware. People often purchased these goods through barter, exchanging wheat, corn, potatoes, eggs, hens, etc., to obtain them. Peasants meanwhile relied heavily on the household production of food and clothing (Scurtu 2003:127,149,160,165). They spent very little money on books and other school supplies, and, although primary schooling was mandatory and free-of-charge, a large percentage of rural dwellers never completed even this level of education. Children and teenagers instead were often drawn into agricultural labor, or in some cases schools were located too far away to make it convenient for children to attend them, especially in winter months (Hitchins 1994:344). As a result, the illiteracy rate remained high in rural areas even if it was somewhat lower than it had been before the war, 57 percent of rural inhabitants incapable of reading in 1915 versus 43 percent in 1940 (János 1978:98-99). Broken down according to gender, between the war 61 percent of women and 37 percent of men still could not read (Hitchins 1994:344, figures are for 1930).

² The less developed areas of the country were those that had existed under Ottoman tutelage until 1877, including Wallachia, Moldova and northern Dobrogea. The regions formerly belonging to the Austria-Hungary monarchy were generally more economically developed than those that had been a part of the Ottoman Empire, a difference that remains evident today.

The low standard of living of rural inhabitants in the interwar period was also apparent in people's generally poor health. This was manifest in the population's life expectancy at birth: despite a slight increase from 40.8 years in 1912-13 to 42 years in 1932, which was partly the result of public health campaigns carried out after the First World War against a number of infectious illnesses like smallpox (Şandru 1980:203), between the wars the average life span in Romania remained approximately eight years lower than in most other European countries. The infant mortality rate, 17.9 deaths per 100 live births in 1938-39, was all but unchanged from the late nineteenth century.³ This figure compared unfavorably with the rest of Europe, including a number of Balkan countries with levels of economic development similar to Romania.⁴ There were several reasons for this high rate of infant death, including a shortage of prenatal care in rural areas, inadequate nutrition and overwork among pregnant women and the fact that the majority of women gave birth at home either with an untrained midwife or with no assistance at all (Scurtu 2003:157). The mortality rate among children aged one to four was also high, a fact attested to by many pensioners I met, who described the childhood deaths of many of their siblings. A large percentage of these deaths was due to respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments associated with inadequate hygiene and poor nutrition (Hitchins 1994:337, Kaser 1976:235, Şandru 1980: 15, 22-23).

The death rate in the general adult population – 21.1 per one thousand inhabitants in 1935 – was elevated relative to the rates in other European countries, and the immediate cause of death among adults varied considerably. Organic diseases were

³ The birthrate was also very high, 34.1 live births per 1000 inhabitants occurring in 1930, a figure that by 1956 dropped to 24.2 (Montias 1967:3). Consistent with this rate, most of my informants had between five and ten or more siblings.

⁴ In Albania the infant mortality rate was 10.0, and in Yugoslavia it was 13.3, per 100 live births in 1938-39 (Şandru 1980:15).

common, accounting annually for the deaths of 1,500 per 100,000 inhabitants. The incidence of a number of “social” maladies such as syphilis, malaria, tuberculosis, pellagra⁵ and alcoholism together contributed to the deaths of more than 200 per 100,000 people per year, and communicable diseases remained a serious threat to public health, up to 100 per 100,000 inhabitants perishing annually from typhus, scarlet fever, typhoid and several other infectious illnesses (Hitchins 1994:337, Kaser 1976: 235, 240-243, Șandru 1980:201-210).

Many conditions contributed to the high morbidity and mortality rates in the general adult population. The shortage of physicians and healthcare facilities in villages was a central one. Toward the end of the interwar period on average one doctor served 17,000 rural inhabitants; meanwhile, in Germany the ratio was 1 to 2,300 and in Italy 1 to 3,000 (Gheorghiu 1937, cited in Scurtu 2003:169). Rural inhabitants were incapable of paying for healthcare services – these were not government subsidized and rural inhabitants were ineligible for accident and illness insurance. By the mid-1930s, less than five percent of the population had access to insurance, and those who did were mostly urban dwellers (Kaser 1976:236).⁶ A study conducted in 1938 showed that most peasant families spent little or no income treating health problems (Golopenția and Georgescu 1941:268-287, 290). As a result of these conditions, the majority of rural inhabitants relied on home remedies for the treatment of medical problems,⁷ and many

⁵ Pellagra develops from a lack of niacin and tryptophan in the diet, causing a photosensitive skin rash, problems with digestion and encephalopathy.

⁶ Romania was, however, one of the first European countries to establish a social insurance system, coverage of public functionaries beginning in nineteenth century (Mihăiță 2003:2).

⁷ An exhibition on medicinal plants at the Botanical Garden in Galați in 2004 offered examples of this. On display were several books published in the early twentieth century with information about the treatment of various illnesses with plants.

strongly held the belief that spiritual forces affected human health (see Kligman 1977 for details).

Inadequate diet contributed as well to the high morbidity and mortality rates among rural dwellers. Many subsisted on a monotonous regimen that failed to provide ample nutrients since their income from agricultural labor was too low to allow a more diversified diet. Although a nutritionally-inadequate food, corn was a widely consumed staple in some regions, including Moldova; this was responsible for the endemic presence of pellagra. The consumption of dairy products and meat was low because most households owned few, if any, domesticated animals. Studies conducted in Moldova in the 1930s, for example, showed that the population consumed between 4 and 8 kilograms (between 8.8 and 17.6 pounds) of meat per person per year (Golopenția and Georgescu 1941:183, Hitchins 1994:342, Șandru 1980:206-207).⁸

Poor sanitation and substandard housing had a further impact on public health during the interwar period (Hitchins 1994:343). Tuberculosis, for example, persisted in many urban areas in part because of overcrowded living conditions. Labor migrants from rural areas were particularly susceptible to this disease because, unlike urban dwellers, who generally had regular exposure to TB, they lacked immunity to it. Those who became infected often subsequently carried the disease to their home villages, where they spread it to kin and neighbors (Șandru 1980:205).

In spite of these generally bleak conditions, cultural practices served to enrich life in rural areas and drew many communities together. Some wealthier village inhabitants

⁸ In comparison, in 2005 the population of the United States on average consumed two hundred pounds of meat (including red meat, poultry and fish) per person (USDA 2007). Although the figure for Moldova would be higher if fish were included in it, the comparison is suggestive.

had income sufficient to hold large birth ceremonies, baptisms, weddings and death rituals in which many villagers participated (Scurtu 2003:150). On a more regular basis, villagers came together for dances called *hore* (plural for *hora*) organized by men, and women regularly gathered for “sittings” or work bees (*șezătoare*), during which girls learned how to make clothing, including dowry items (Kligman 1988:57).

Marriage in most cases resulted in new couples building their own dwellings on land owned by the husband’s parents, which, as I describe next, exacerbated a problem of land scarcity even as it kept communities together. In marked contrast to the present day, the youngest or only son, or, without one, the youngest or only daughter, remained at his birth home after marriage, bringing his wife to live with him and his parents, or, in case the youngest was a daughter, her husband would move into his in-laws’ home. They were expected to raise their children there and to care for his or her parents in old age, and after they died they were responsible for giving *pomană* on their behalves (Scurtu 2003:155).

The lives of rural inhabitants were shaped by a number of economic and political processes beyond the failure of the state to invest in the rural healthcare infrastructure. One of these was the inadequacy of the land reform process carried out following the First World War based on legislation enacted in 1918 and 1921 to address the problem of unequal access to land. Although there is lasting debate about the precise amount of land expropriated from large landowners – the Romanian government estimated by the end of the 1920s, when it determined that the reform process was effectively completed, that approximately six million hectares (14.8 million acres) had been confiscated, but as late as 1940 it publicly disclosed that much work had not been done, nearly 900,000 hectares

(2.2 million acres) having not been redistributed (Roberts 1969:48) – even low estimates of the amount of land expropriated constituted a significant percentage of Romania’s arable property. Nevertheless, the reform left many peasants without access to land. One measurement from 1938 shows that only 69.5 percent of peasants with a right to land actually received land, but even this figure is deceptive if one considers regional variation: in Wallachia and Moldova (together called “The Old Kingdom” – *Regatul*) only 60.3 percent of those with a right to land actually received it while in Transylvania it was 63.3 percent, in Bukovina 93.2 percent and in Bessarabia purportedly 100 percent (Roberts 1969:367). It was not only the failure to adequately redistribute land through reform, however, that contributed to peasants’ marginal existence. The land that was expropriated was often given out in fragmented lots, a situation that was worsened by the aforementioned practice among peasant families of dividing land into equal portions as inheritance (Roberts 1969:29; see also Golopenția and Georgescu 1941:9-41 and Hitchins 1994:340, 347-359 for this history). Since the average amount of land acquired through reform was only 2.8 hectares (6.9 acres) (Roberts 1969:367), this practice quickly reduced the size of holdings to very small amounts because of the large number of children in most rural families.

Peasants’ insufficient access to productive land resulted in many of them renting lots from large landowners, paying for their use with money or crops (see Golopenția and Georgescu 1941:229-250 for data on such payments). This arrangement essentially prolonged the serfdom-like conditions that prevailed before the land reform initiative was carried out. This was particularly true in Moldova, where the land reform process was

hampered by an especially high population density.⁹ There is, indeed, an irony here. As the demographic histories of very poor people often show, high rates of infant and child mortality can coexist with exceptionally high birth rates (Schneider and Schneider 1996).

Landlessness forced a significant number of people to migrate seasonally for work in agriculture (Hitchins 1994:340). Others sought work in the industrial sector, but its still small dimensions made it difficult for the sector to absorb much of the enormous rural population: in 1938, industry accounted for only two percent of exported goods. As pointed out above, foodstuffs were still the nation's top exports even if there were declines in the interwar period in the export of wheat and corn. This meant that, although the number of enterprises engaged in manufacturing metals, petroleum products, chemicals, paper and textiles and in processing foodstuffs expanded relatively significantly between the wars, only a few urban areas truly experienced this growth (Montias 1967:7-10). Galați was included among them largely because of its attractive location as a port on the Danube River. As a result it underwent a modest amount of industrial development between the wars (Brezeanu and Munteanu 1972:142-144), but it still could absorb only a limited number of the underemployed rural population.

Agriculture's predominance economically did not run parallel with adequate government funding to the sector. As noted earlier, most peasants relied on traditional tools to farm. In addition, the government maintained low market prices on agricultural goods in order to make inexpensive foodstuffs available to the urban industrial workforce, on top of which, rural households were heavily taxed by the state. Many took out bank loans in order to improve their situation, but these could not be paid back when

⁹ See Roberts 1969:41-47 regarding this matter. Figures from 1945 show that the density of Romania's rural population was greater than in all other European countries except Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Poland and the Netherlands.

the Great Depression began in 1929, key outcomes of which were the global drop in grain prices and the setting up of import tariffs on grains by many countries in order to protect their domestic agricultural sectors. The Romanian state did step in to help rural households through the crisis, but this did not end the general tendency to neglect the agricultural sector in this period (Hitchins 1994:357-358, Verdery 1983:330-331).

Funding, meanwhile, flowed to industry for the purchase of machines from abroad. Legislators erected steep tariffs on foreign competitors and restricted outside investment in the economy although not in all sectors: between the wars foreigners had a major stake in the petroleum industry near the city of Bacău as one informant, Adrian Tomescu, describes in his life history in chapter three. Many politicians were driven by nationalist sentiments in their support of these policies, hoping they would free Romania from long-term control by foreign powers. This was nevertheless inadequate for building the industrial sector to dimensions capable of absorbing the rural population even if this was some legislators' intent. Matters were not helped by the fact that many industrialists were benefiting personally from their close ties to government officials (Hitchins 1994:359-364).

It was not only developments in the economic sector that caused rural inhabitants' standard of living to remain low between the wars. Political life, too, played a major role in this, even if in the immediate postwar period political changes were underway that appeared to promise a better future for the population of Romania. In contrast to the prewar period, when the majority of people had little influence over national and local political matters, these being nearly exclusively controlled by a wealthy elite centered in Bucharest, the democratization of the political realm began to occur after the war,

paralleling advances throughout much of Europe in this period (Mazower 1998:3-13). In most cases, as in Romania's, democratization involved the formation of parliamentary institutions, the enactment of liberal democratic constitutions and the extension of universal suffrage. Citizens of Romania were directly encouraged to support candidates representing democratic political parties in their bids for elective office, efforts which influenced the widespread endorsement in the 1928 election of, in particular, the National Peasant Party (*PNȚ – Partidul Național Țărănesc*) (Hitchins 1994:90-96, 405-416).

Despite these developments, the consolidation of democracy was not fully achieved between the wars. Notwithstanding the success of the *PNȚ* in 1928, throughout much of the 1920s, power was held by the Liberal Party (*PL – Partidul Liberal*), leaders of which were disposed to authoritarian rule and were strongly influenced by the rich industrialists and large landowners.¹⁰ By the end of that decade, democratic reform was further threatened by the onset of the Great Depression, the inadequacy of the postwar land reform and the state's neglect of the basic needs of especially the rural population (Hitchins 1994:416-425, Hupchick and Cox 2001:37, Mazower 1998:13-27). In this environment, leftist political parties became ineffective, and a number of extreme rightwing opposition groups, including the fascist Iron Guard (formally known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael), rose up to offer solutions and to stake a claim to power (Gay 2001, Mazower 1998:27-32, Sebastian 2000, Weber 1966). They received a

¹⁰ Some intellectuals also played a role in the failure of democracy to consolidate through their influence on politicians. One particularly persuasive figure was Ștefan Zeletin, who, according to Chirot (1978:32), believed that "[d]emocracy...would have to take a temporary back seat to the needs of the capitalist oligarchy that would lead Romania into the modern industrial age." Șerban Voinea argued that a "genuine pluralist democracy" would serve the country best, but his effect on the political establishment, and those of other intellectuals who held similar opinions, was limited. This debate originates in the nineteenth century; see Love (1996) for details.

great deal of support from the population, including many prominent intellectuals.¹¹ This political transformation continued in 1930 with the rise to power of the authoritarian monarch King Carol II, who introduced various initiatives that undermined democratic governance. These changes contributed to the formal end of Romania's first experiment with parliamentary democracy, King Carol establishing a royal dictatorship in 1938. In the end, this movement to the right was not to the benefit of rural inhabitants either politically or economically. On the contrary, their poverty continued to be largely overlooked by the government throughout the 1930s.

From the perspective of a large segment of the peasant population, the interwar period thus ended much as it had begun. Most worked with few productive resources beyond their own labor given the lack of government investment in the agricultural sector, and most consumed little more than basic necessities due to their low income from farming, persistent indebtedness and the need to pay disproportionately large taxes to the state. Their health status was generally very poor, and few received more than a basic education. As a result, they had little on which to fall back except kin and their local communities, but the support they could provide, although vital, was limited since most other people in rural areas were in the same dire situation. After the Great Depression ended, there were improvements that suggested rural inhabitants' impoverishment might have begun to lessen, including renewed expansion of the industrial sector that may have resulted in more jobs. The onset of the Second World War in 1939 put a temporary end to these possibilities.

¹¹ The philosopher Nae Ionescu and the historian Mircea Eliade were among those who supported the Iron Guard. See writer Mihail Sebastian's journal (2000:passim) for details about their positions.

The Second World War (1939-1945)

The already marginal existence of rural inhabitants in Romania was significantly worsened by the Second World War. This had much to do with Romanian leaders' decision to ally with Nazi Germany beginning in 1940, which resulted from several converging events in the early years of the war. These included the refusal of Romania's allies, France and the United Kingdom, to guarantee Romania support in its drive to hold on to the territory it had gained at Versailles. Although Germany never directly offered support either, King Carol II anticipated its backing – a gamble that turned out, however, to be mistaken. Germany vowed to protect Romania's borders only after it lost territory to the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Hungary – an outcome that ultimately cost Carol his rule and ushered in the “military dictatorship” of General Antonescu in 1941 (Hitchins 1996:469). The alliance with Germany also resulted from pressure coming from the Third Reich, which was eager to ensure its access to Romania's rich storehouse of petroleum reserves, mineral wealth, arable land and human capital. Germany insidiously coupled this pressure with a number of enticements, including promises of technical assistance to Romania's industrial sector (Radice 1986:303) in order to win Romania to its side. Furthermore, Nazi military victories – especially those against France and the Low Countries in 1940 – led leaders in Romania to calculate that allying with Germany would be in the country's best interests (Hitchins 1994:437-450, Hupchick and Cox 2001:42, Sebastian 2000).

This decision – effectively leading to Romania's acquiescence to Nazi domination – had a significant impact on the Romanian economy. The industrial sector was directed primarily toward the Nazi military campaign, causing its post-Depression commercial

recovery to falter. It also traded agricultural goods, such as wheat and corn, and natural resources, such as petroleum, largely with Germany. Although Romania gained access to military equipment, agricultural machinery and the technical support in return, the economic relationship between the two was imbalanced, the Third Reich benefiting more than did Romania (Radice 1986:300-303).

The population was deeply affected by the alliance with Germany in many ways. The conscription of men into the military drained labor from both the agricultural and industrial sectors. A large percentage of these men would never return – as many as 300,000 soldiers from Romania ultimately perished in fighting on the Soviet front (Judt 2005:18). Shortages of food became a recurrent problem because of the trade in agricultural goods with Germany and because foodstuffs were diverted to the approximately 170,000 German troops stationed in the country (Hitchins 1994:463, 481, Sebastian 2000:352). The cost of food became inflationary because the German government purchased Romania's agricultural goods at high prices. According to Sebastian, the price increases were met with great alarm in Bucharest (2000:406, 421, 503). Following Nazi racial laws, Jews and Roma/Gypsies were singled out for discrimination. In the summer of 1940, as Romania's ties with Germany strengthened, a law was passed decreeing that Jews could no longer work in civil administration. That summer they were stripped of basic political and civil rights, and, not long thereafter, property was expropriated from them. In 1941, after the rise to power of the Antonescu dictatorship, the condition for these minorities worsened yet further. Jewish men, who were forbidden to perform military service, were subject to serve as laborers or to carry out their professional skills at the behest of the military. Deportations of Jews and

Roma/Gypsies began that year, and many who were sent out of the country, mostly to occupied Soviet territory, died from starvation, torture and mass execution. Although all together Romania did not go as far as the Third Reich in attempting to entirely eliminate these minorities, largely because of Antonescu's opportunistic desire to look good to the Allies as Germany began to lose the war, the effect on Jews and Roma/Gypsies was devastating – many thousands of both groups died during the conflict (Fonseca 1995: 243-251, Hitchins 1994:483-486, Sebastian 2000:passim).¹²

Conditions for civilians in Romania deteriorated even further after Germany declared war against the Soviet Union in 1941. This brought hostilities directly to prominent industrial centers, the city of Galați experiencing particularly intense fighting partly because of its location near the frontline. Its industrial, military and civilian infrastructure was bombed by Allied forces on several occasions, while the German military mined roads and ravaged factories, hospitals and other infrastructure as it retreated from Galați during the Allied siege of the city in August 1944 (Brezeanu and Munteanu 1972:145, Cilincă 2004:4-5, Păltănea 2004:12-13). There followed a successful coup against the Antonescu dictatorship on August 23 influenced by this destruction and by mounting losses by Germany and other Axis powers against the Allies. With the coup, Romania switched sides, joining the Allies, and the Russian army occupied Bucharest (Hitchins 1994:500).

All told, the toll in human life was significant in Galați, which partly contributed to a decline in the city's population from approximately 100,000 people in 1930 to

¹² The Romanian government has only recently begun to acknowledge its role in the Holocaust, the first official Holocaust Remembrance Day being held in 2004. For a period during my research, a poster was displayed publicly in Galați concerning a pogrom that had occurred in 1941 in Iași, a city to the north, asking anyone with information about perpetrators to come forward.

80,000 in 1948, one of the largest declines in urban population in Romania during the war (Giurescu et al. 2003:965). Moldovan and Dobrogean villages along the frontline were drawn into the conflict as well, including several in which a number of pensioners I came to know had resided. These included Victoria Dobre, the pensioner with whom I lived. Her life history in chapter three recounts her experiences as a refugee during the war. By the end of the war, it is estimated that approximately 200,000 civilians in Romania had perished from the conflict (Judt 2005:18).

Development of the Socialist State (1945-1978)

After the Second World War, Romania underwent transformative – indeed, revolutionary – change at many levels that deeply affected the lives of people throughout the country, including men and women of different class backgrounds in rural and urban areas. This resulted from the influence the Soviet Union gained over Romania and much of the rest of Eastern Europe. At conferences in Yalta (February 1945) and Potsdam (July-August 1945), Stalin succeeded in persuading the United States and the United Kingdom that the Soviet Union needed a geopolitical buffer under its control that would protect it against any future attempt by another state to undermine its territorial integrity. The impact of this on the political economy of Romania and the other countries of the region was extensive.

The Soviet presence in the political life of Romania was quickly evident in the rise to power of the Romanian Communist Party (*PCR – Partidul Comunist Român*) not long after the war. A relatively minor party weakened by internal dissension at the time of the coup against Antonescu in August 1944, by 1947 membership in the *PCR* had

grown substantially and it exercised unprecedented influence over the state.¹³ The Soviet Union helped to ensure this by applying political pressure on Romanian leaders and by influencing elections. Moscow furthermore developed loyalty among politicians by supporting the country's bid to regain Transylvania in international negotiations. The lasting presence of its military – Romania was occupied by the U.S.S.R. until 1958 – gave further legitimacy to the *PCR*'s claim to power as did Soviet control over the Romanian army, police and security force, then called the *Siguranța*. The onset of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and its former western allies had the effect of further solidifying the party's power such that by late 1947 the *PCR* had replaced a coalition of parties governing since the end of the war. It would singularly hold this power for over forty years (Judt 2005:130-137, King 1980:47, Mazower 1998:252-261, Tismăneanu 2003:85-106).

The economy of Romania was subject to Soviet authority in the immediate postwar period. As a result of fighting against the Soviet Union, Romania was required to pay reparations in petroleum, industrial machinery, agricultural products, livestock, lumber, and other goods,¹⁴ and it was obliged to supply provisions to the Soviet military (Hitchins 1994:536, Montias 1967:18). Joint Soviet-Romanian firms (known as

¹³ In August 1944 there were approximately 1000 members in the *PCR*; by the end of 1947 party membership had increased to over 800,000. In roughly the same time frame the *PCR* moved from operating in coalition with a number of other parties under the umbrella of the National Democratic Front (which also included the Social Democratic Party, the Union of Patriots and the Plowman's Front) to maintaining near complete control over the government in a pseudo-coalition with the Social Democratic Party, many non-communist members of which had been purged. In February 1948 this coalition between the *PCR* and SDP was named the Romanian Workers Party (*PMR – Partidul Muncitoresc Român*) (see King 1980:48-50, 71 for details).

¹⁴ According to Montias (1964:126) reparations to the Soviet Union through the year 1948 totaled 41 million dollars (in 1938 dollars). He notes that Romania additionally missed out on foreign exchange earnings because of the requirement to make these payments. Several of my informants made reference to these reparations, uniformly blaming the Soviet Union for their negative impact on Romania's postwar reconstruction. Some argued that this had contributed to the 1947 famine in Moldova, some of the effects of which are described in chapter three. At the same time, no one I knew ever suggested that the reparations were to some extent justified given the destruction the Soviet Union underwent during the war.

Sovroms) were forcibly established in a number of key industries such as transportation and petroleum production. Until they were dissolved following Stalin's death in 1953, these operated largely to the financial benefit of the Soviet Union (Montias 1967:19). Meanwhile, the *PCR* embarked on an economic program that staunchly adhered to Stalinist principles. This involved directing a disproportionate amount of revenue to the development of heavy industry, a policy that would be implemented to varying degrees throughout most of the socialist period with the expectation that it would ensure the country's modernization. At the same time, much of the previously existing economy began to be nationalized, including manufacturing facilities and the retail sector.

The focus on industrial development resulted in the migration of a moderate number of peasants to urban areas for work: statistics show that the urban population grew from 3.75 to 4.42 million from 1948 to 1953, an increase from 23.5 to 26.3 percent of the population (Montias 1967:29). This relocation of rural dwellers proved problematic as a result of a general lack of investment in the service and retail sectors. Indeed, the new urban population's access to public services and consumer goods remained very restricted up to 1953, basic foodstuffs and clothing being rationed for a period (Gilberg 1975:152-160, Mazower 1998:266-273, Montias 1967:23-38). One pensioner I met, a member of the intelligentsia born in 1934, remembered that people were allowed between 300 and 350 grams (10.5 and 12.3 ounces) of bread (a staple of the urban diet) each day.

The agricultural sector was relatively neglected and still remained largely in private hands in this early postwar period. State investment was sparse even as demands upon producers increased. Until 1956, farm laborers were required to fill state-directed

quotas on agricultural goods; in the absence of improved technology, this meant increased pressure on peasants to raise productivity through heavier labor. Meanwhile, prices on farm produce, as during the interwar period, were kept artificially low, which secured a steady supply of food for the gradually increasing number of industrial laborers. As before, this worsened the standard of living of rural dwellers to the point at which some harbored unflagging resentment toward the state, as will be shown in Adrian Tomescu's life history in chapter three (see Mazower 1998:269, Montias 1967:32, Verdery 1983:36-38, 43 for more on the agricultural sector in the early postwar years).

In this same period, a decree was passed in the Romanian parliament that nationalized privately-owned houses. This, too, had a quite dramatic impact, especially in urban areas, as Chelcea describes (2003:726-731). Homeowners became tenants, and houses that the state determined were under-used were made available to additional occupants, that is, to people who were unrelated to the former owners of the house. This process had many implications, including the dispersal of kin who had once resided in the houses. This took place in part because many people did not like living with strangers. At the same time, it was facilitated by the possibility of obtaining an apartment from the state, which had become relatively easy, a point I return to below. Another significant impact of this nationalization process was a major change in the status and role of "family patriarchs" and the elderly in general. They lost their position as distributors of inheritance since they no longer owned their homes. The adoption of a "nurturing role" by pensioners seems to have been one outcome of this; that is, they began to take care of their grandchildren as they had their own children. This change also resulted from the growth of the economy, as I also discuss below; new pressures on the working-aged

population caused them to need their parents to look after their children. A big difference from a generation earlier, however, was that in this historical period people were having far fewer children.

After a brief slowdown in industrial production and the cessation of the collectivization of agriculture during the mid-1950s, which stemmed from a rethinking of economic policy following Stalin's death in 1953, some political leaders arguing for a more balanced approach to economic development rather than a concentration on heavy industry, the economy began a new period of expansion that lasted nearly two decades. In spite of the resistance put forth by domestic and also some external sources, including a number of Comecon members,¹⁵ this involved further investment in heavy industry reflected in the construction of manufacturing facilities like the goliath steel mill in Galați. Albeit at a slower pace than heavy industries, consumer goods manufacturing expanded in this period, but the state remained focused on developing the heavy industrial sector which, by 1970, contributed 70 percent to GNP, a remarkable increase from the interwar period. Moreover, production for export rose substantially during this post-Stalinist expansion (Cole 1981:74, 80, Montias 1967:53-79, Tismăneanu 2003:136-167, Shafir 1985:107-126, Verdery 1983:41). The growth of industry during these two decades was approximately 10 percent annually, a rate unparalleled by the other

¹⁵ The Comecon was the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (and hence also referred to as the CMEA), which was formed in 1949 under Soviet auspices in response to the US German Marshall Plan of 1948 (Hupchick and Cox 2001:47). Following Stalin's death, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in particular insisted on Romania shifting its economic priorities to agriculture so that it could serve long-term as a net exporter of foodstuffs to the region. They also anticipated it would be an importer of industrial machinery and manufactured goods from the more developed countries of the Soviet bloc, which included them (Montias 1964).

Comecon members and many other countries in the world; it arguably constituted the longest period of economic expansion in Romania's history (Cole 1981:74).¹⁶

Most arable land was consolidated into cooperatives and state farms between 1958 and 1962. State officials carried out this radical transformation of the agricultural sector for several reasons: they expected that it would release a sizable percentage of peasants from agricultural labor to work in industry; they anticipated that it would give the state greater control over the variety of foodstuffs produced; and they believed it would result in an increase in farming output (Verdery 1983:43-45). Despite praiseworthy improvements as a result of collectivization, agriculture continued to lag behind industry because of persistently inadequate investment in the sector and the inefficient use of human and material resources (Gilberg 1975:171-189, Montias 1967:33-34, Verdery 1983:45-48). Thus, although there were increases in output over rates achieved between the wars, the sector was characterized by low productivity relative to other European countries. In the long run, this was a significant deficit to the economy given the size of Romania's farming sector and the foreign exchange earnings it had the potential to pull in (Montias 1967:87-134, Gilberg 1975:171-189).

Overall, the drive to industrialize and the decision to collectivize agriculture in this period did, however, fundamentally change the work lives of rural dwellers. Employment in agriculture dropped significantly – in 1950, 75 percent of the working-aged population still engaged full-time in agriculture, but by 1975 only 35 percent did so. Meanwhile, employment in industry expanded from 19 to 52 percent (Cole 1981:74).

¹⁶ This economic expansion was largely responsible for the Romanian government's repeated decision to put off economic reform. Contrary to other states in the Soviet bloc, such as Hungary under Kádár, Romania carried out relatively little reform under socialism (Kaser 1975:173, Spigler 1973:3), a policy more or less held on to until the revolution in 1989.

Men from rural areas became laborers in metallurgy, machine-building and other heavy industries, and, although in somewhat smaller numbers, women began to work in textile manufacturing, food processing and other light industries (Moskoff 1978:449). The higher salaries and better benefits (more on this below) offered in industry than in agriculture attracted many people. In turn, this allowed people to increase spending on consumer goods, ceremonial events and education (Verdery 1983:61-61). This transformation – and the state’s guarantee of employment and control of inflation – had a major impact on rural dwellers’ standard of living by raising it above the marginal existence shown for the interwar period. Although this change was imperfect and people were pressed into rigorous labor, as will be revealed in the life histories in the next chapter, it is the loss of this financial and work security that today’s pensioners often reflect upon in describing the stress of life in contemporary Romania.

In spite of the fact that most new industries were located in or near major urban centers, industrial laborers continued to reside in large numbers in the countryside. The state placed firm restrictions on internal migration, making commuting between rural and urban areas very common: in 1970 approximately 1.2 million people (out of a total population of 20.3 million) commuted to work. This allowed the state to further postpone investment in urban public services and in the construction of homes, thereby avoiding the housing crisis experienced in the U.S.S.R. during a comparable phase of industrialization in the 1930s. Instead, funds were targeted to the development of manufacturing facilities (Moskoff 1978:442-443). Many people I met, men in particular, described commuting between their villages and the city, in most cases receiving homes, or mortgages on homes, in Galați only after many years of following this routine. While

men commuted to work in the new industries, women in large numbers were occupied exclusively in the countryside. They worked on collective farms and in household gardens,¹⁷ and they bore most of the responsibility for childcare and a number of household activities such as food preparation and housecleaning (Cernea 1978:117, Moskoff 1978:450, Kideckel 1993:126-129).

The number of urban inhabitants nevertheless did increase in this period. From 1948 to 1977, the proportion of people living in urban areas grew from 23.4 to 47.8 percent (Cole 1981:74), a trend even greater in Galați, where the population grew from 80,400 to 230,000 in the same years although most of this expansion occurred in the 1970s (Giurescu et al. 2003:965). A turn toward the urbanization of the peasantry was clearly under way. Even so, the move toward employment in industry did not lead to people's abandoning work in agriculture, many continuing to make regular contributions to this sector of the economy. Thus, a new class of peasant-workers took shape (Cole 1981:88-95, Kideckel 1993, Verdery 1983:58-60), a process that, although somewhat different from place to place, occurred in other newly industrializing countries in the Balkans (Creed 1998, Halpern 1956, Simić 1973). For both men and women it was therefore a period when demands on their labor were enormous.

Ritual life in Romania remained relatively intact even as this transformation in people's work lives took place. Weddings and *pomeni*, the ceremonies honoring the dead, continued to be important; as noted above, the increases in income even allowed these to become more elaborate. Although the changes to people's work lives in some

¹⁷ Rural households were provided a small plot of land to raise crops for household consumption, a benefit that became especially valuable when, as discussed below, the economy experienced a major downturn. These private plots were not given freely but had to be earned through work on the cooperative farm (Kideckel 1993:115-116).

cases drew them away from their communities (on a weekly basis, seasonally or perhaps even for longer periods of time), this did not fundamentally disrupt ceremonial life since people characteristically returned to their kin and communities to fulfill such obligations. Kligman, for example, records how, during socialism, migrant workers from Maramureș returned home for celebrations to “reconstitute their familiar selves” (1988:264). Moreover, despite pressure to work on holidays such as Easter (*Paști*), some of my informants described respecting the ceremonial calendar even if it meant rearranging schedules and staying up late to prepare meals. Thus, under socialism the kin and other social networks that existed during the interwar period remained relatively intact, a condition made possible partly by the fulfillment of customary practices such as weddings and *pomeni*.

A number of major changes did accompany the transformation of people’s work lives and their increasing urbanization. As was the case throughout the Soviet bloc, the public sector was significantly expanded, a process that flowed from both a desire to improve economic output and a commitment to raise the standard of living of the general population (Mazower 1998:178, 257). In a relatively short span of time, health care, social insurance and education became widely available, and, although imperfections beset initiatives in all of these domains, in general this change improved the quality of life in Romania considerably. Along side the employment and income security, it was this massive broadening of the social safety net that today’s pensioners remember so well.

The creation of a national healthcare system began soon after the war. One of the system’s first efforts was halting the spread of infectious diseases, which continued to

plague both rural and urban populations. It met this challenge successfully, reducing the incidence of diphtheria, poliomyelitis, typhoid fever, tetanus and several other contagious illnesses markedly such that by the 1960s these were all but eliminated from the population.¹⁸ Also by the 1960s a range of other healthcare benefits, including emergency treatment and prenatal care services were extended free-of-charge, at least officially, to most people in rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, the proportion of trained physicians (and nurses and other medical professionals) to the population grew significantly – by 1974 the ratio was one physician to every 630 people (recall that during the interwar period in rural areas there was one doctor for every 17,000 inhabitants) – as a result of an expansion of medical schools in major cities such as Bucharest, Iași, Cluj and Timișoara. In 1960 there were nearly 25,000 physicians in the country and by the early 1970s the number had gone above 31,000. Their knowledge was among the most comprehensive within the Soviet bloc partly because of widespread familiarity with French, a language related to Romanian that was widely taught in schools even during the socialist period, allowing them to keep abreast of advances in medicine in the West (Kaser 1976:241, 244, 246-248, 262). On top of all this, the number of hospitals, polyclinics, dispensaries and “health posts” (*puncte sanitare* – located in rural areas, these proved basic healthcare services) grew.

Notwithstanding these remarkable achievements, inequality in access to healthcare services persisted between rural and urban areas and on the basis of class.

¹⁸ Such campaigns were carried out throughout most of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in this period with much success (Garrett 2000, Tulchinsky and Varavikova 1996). In the case of Romania, tuberculosis, however, proved difficult to entirely eliminate in many areas because of a persistent problem with poor housing conditions among migrant workers in urban areas. Even in the late 1960s it caused one in seven deaths (Kaser 1976:240-241).

Civil servants and industrial laborers received free in- and outpatient care, examinations, laboratory tests and pharmaceutical drugs; cooperative farmers had cost-free access to outpatient care in rural dispensaries but received only a 50 to 75 percent reduction in the price of services available at polyclinics and hospitals located in cities. The number of visits rural residents made to physicians remained low relative to people living in cities because, although their numbers had increased, physicians still disproportionately served urban dwellers (79 percent of physicians working in urban areas in 1968). To no surprise, rural inhabitants consequently continued to rely heavily on herbal remedies to treat illnesses (Kaser 1976:246, 248).

In spite of this inequality, major improvements to the population's health status occurred following the expansion of the healthcare system. Life expectancy at birth grew significantly: from the 42.0 years documented in 1932, it reached 63.2 years in 1956, and it was 68.6 years in 1970-72 (the time frames for these figures varying according to the manner in which statistics were kept) – an increase of more than a quarter century in just over four decades. The death rate meanwhile declined substantially over the same period: in 1967, 10.0 out of 1000 rural inhabitants and 8.2 out of 1000 urban dwellers died annually in comparison with the national average of 19.0 out of 1000 in 1938.

As noted earlier there was a simultaneous decline in the birthrate from approximately 24.2 births out of 1000 inhabitants in 1956 to approximately 14.0 out of 1000 a decade later. The birthrate increased, however, in 1966, and for a few years thereafter it remained higher than in the previous decade following legislation that made abortion illegal. Ceaușescu initiated this legislation, arguing that abortion was bad for women's health and that it negatively influenced population growth. But behind this lay

Ceaușescu's desire to set himself apart from Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, whom he had succeeded as president in 1965; in keeping with Soviet policy, he had maintained abortion legal, but Ceaușescu was eager to create greater distance between Romania and the U.S.S.R. (Kligman 1998:52-54).

The causes of morbidity and mortality changed partly because of the extension of healthcare services and improvements in nutrition.¹⁹ In addition to the elimination of infectious diseases mentioned above, malaria and pellagra were almost entirely wiped out by the 1960s. Deaths due to influenza and pneumonia became less common, and fewer people died because of some diseases of the digestive and the genito-urinary systems. Similar to a trend observed in western industrialized countries, the incidence of chronic degenerative diseases began, however, to grow in Romania just as in other Soviet bloc countries. Although rates of these in the region remained low relative to those in the West, a new, broad pattern of population health and illness was emerging – cardiovascular diseases, disorders of the nervous system, diabetes and cancers became more common. In Romania, the rate of obstetrical complications grew partially because of the restriction on abortion, and occupational illnesses became endemic among some sectors of the population due to new work demands and conditions. Data show an increase as well in the incidence of mental illness although this may have been the result of somewhat improved access to psychiatric services and therefore increased attention to psychological diseases. Still, attention to mental health conditions lagged behind that to physical ailments, statistics on the number of trained psychologists showing that in 1960 there was nation-wide a total of only 30, and in 1968 the figure had risen to a mere 78

¹⁹ See Montias (1967:51) for statistics on this, which show that the consumption of meat, butter and sugar grew beginning in the 1950s.

(Kaser 1976:238-241, 256-257, 262). See appendices C and D for data on morbidity and mortality beginning in 1970.

Concurrent with the development of the healthcare system, social welfare entitlements – maternity leave, benefits for illness, accident and disability and pensions – were extended to the majority of people. Of particular relevance here were changes to the retirement system, which began with the passage in 1949 of Law 10 transforming the financing of pensions (and other entitlements). Liquidating institutions that had administered these benefits since the nineteenth century, the government replaced them with direct state ownership.²⁰ It also stipulated the use of general tax revenues to finance pensions; made coverage officially universal; set benefit amounts at 50 to 80 percent of former wages; fixed official retirement ages for women and men at 55 and 60 years, respectively; and created the “survivor’s pension” for dependents of pensioners who had passed away (Ghimpu et al. 1998:37-40, Mihăiță 2003:3-4, Porket 1980:57).

Over time a number of amendments were made to this law. In 1959, when the drive to industrialize was in high gear, salaried employees were classified according to “work groups” (*grupe de muncă*) based on how harsh and dangerous the work they performed was determined to be: people employed in occupations categorized as the most difficult and risky received the highest pensions and the right to retire at the youngest ages in comparison to others – a change that heightened the incentive to take up positions in heavy industry.²¹ A number of other modifications were made in the 1960s, one of which sought to keep retirement income apace with the cost-of-living and another which

²⁰ In 1895 the Department of Pensions (*Casa de Pensii*) had been established to administer the pension schemes in which some urban professionals were required to participate (Mihăiță 2003:3).

²¹ The assessment of difficulty was partly influenced by ideology. While work in heavy industry was rightly designated as among the most strenuous, agricultural labor was categorized as less difficult, reflecting the greater importance given to industry in economic development.

made changes to the methods for calculating pensions. These changes resulted in some pensioners' income maintaining the level of former wages; the overall outcome was an increase in the standard of living of retirees from the end of the war until the 1970s (Ghimpu et al. *ibid.*, Mihăiță *ibid.*, Porket *ibid.*).

Despite this achievement, the retirement system was characterized by a number of problems. Inequality in income among pensioners and between pensioners and workers was extensive. Gender was an enduring basis for inequality because women disproportionately held occupations that offered lower remuneration than those held by men or because they performed work for which they did not receive wages and therefore had to rely on the survivor's pension if their husbands died before them. In addition, in spite of the periodic adjustment of retirement income to the cost of living, "recently awarded" pensions tended to cover household expenses more adequately than those conferred in earlier years (Porket 1980:79).²²

Greater investment at the same time in elementary and secondary education allowed a much larger portion of the population to receive schooling than had been the case between the wars. Elementary school enrollment alone increased 84 percent between 1938 and 1972 (Gilberg 1975:102); enrollment in elementary and secondary school together rose 300 percent between 1938 and 1960 (Kideckel 1993:83). One result of this increase in educational opportunity was the near-complete eradication of illiteracy by the mid-1960s. A new focus on vocational training led to more and more youth being

²² Porket's study casts grave doubt on the ability of the pension systems of the Soviet bloc to meet population needs. He contrasts them with pension systems in the West, concluding that the latter offered more comprehensive benefits. In making this argument, he surprisingly overlooks the goods and subsidies socialist governments extended to their populations at little or no cost, a form of "paternalistic redistribution" described by Verdery (1996:25-26). In this respect, the pension systems in the Soviet bloc compared favorably with that in the United States, where poverty among the elderly remained generalized until the 1970s, when congress legislated pension increases and pensions became indexed to the cost of living (Ida Susser 2006:personal communication; see also Olson 1982:50).

educated in technical fields (Gilberg 1975:100-105). Meanwhile, party-state leaders directed revenue to higher education. Funding for technical and scientific fields was higher than for others since professionals trained in these areas were considered essential to the country's modernization. Accordingly, large numbers of men and women were educated in disciplines such as engineering, metallurgy, machine-building, agriculture, chemistry, economics, math, physics and medicine. The skewed financing of these fields meant, however, that relatively few people were trained in trades applicable to consumer goods industries, the service sector and transportation; similarly, the humanities and the social sciences suffered from limited budgets (Gilberg 1975:97-118).

Civil infrastructure expanded during this period at a historically unprecedented rate. The transportation system grew, affording rural inhabitants easier access to jobs and markets in urban centers; electrical power and other utilities were extended to towns and villages long deprived these services; and telecommunication services were made available in areas where they had been absent (Gilberg 1975:190-197, 201-202, Kideckel 1993:94). In spite of the breadth of this development, civil infrastructure continued to experience difficulty supporting the growth in industry. The network of railways and roads could not efficiently handle industrial output and, as noted above, the construction of new homes in urban areas fell short of rural inhabitants' expectations (Gilberg 1975:197-199). Sewage disposal and water purification were inadequately managed by government authorities – a neglect which caused a number of public health problems to persist (Kaser 1976:246-247). This is not to say that the improvements in civil infrastructure were not impressive; indeed they were, the shortfalls being more a result of

the generally low point at which Romania began its postwar economic expansion than anything else.

Still, officials within the party-state were compelled to employ a number of ideological tactics to ensure citizens' participation in and compliance with the country's transformation into an industrialized, socialist republic comparable with others in the Soviet bloc. Leaders stirred up national sentiment particularly from the 1960s onward, when they decided to follow their own road economically. This involved not only standing up to the Comecon but also encouraging people to participate in industrial labor to ensure their country's independence from the U.S.S.R. This maneuvering contributed to a strain in relations between Romania and the Soviet Union, which was exacerbated in 1968 when Romania refused to condone the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. This stance against the Soviet Union won the country much favor in the West, opening it up to support from western financial institutions (Deletant 2003:430, 432) – as will be shown below, this “support” came with a high price when years later Romania struggled to manage its massive debt to these institutions.²³ Propaganda campaigns initiated by the party-state furthermore urged citizens to support the country's development. These included promotion of a “cult of labor,” the purpose of which was to stimulate people's participation in productive activities (Kideckel 1993:61). An example of the success of this campaign appears in Raluca Barbu's life history, but, as Adrian Tomescu's narrative shows, some people were not supportive of it, at the very least retrospectively, nor did they condone other initiatives undertaken by the party-state.

²³ Verdery (1991:121-122) points out that this was neither the only nor necessarily the most important reason for national ideology to become, seemingly in contrast with Marxism-Leninism, a central feature of the PCR. She discusses how nationalism was taken up by leaders in part as a result of influence from intellectuals, and she describes commonalities between Romanian nationalism and the form of socialism leaders adopted.

An extensive internal secret police apparatus, by then called the *Securitate*, was operationalized under the highly autocratic regimes of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1955-1965) and Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989) in order to guarantee the population's conformity to the socialist regime. Until the late 1950s, this tool forced some people typically of bourgeois class background into very harsh work activities such as the construction of the Black Sea canal²⁴ and imprisoned or executed others whose activities and values were deemed unsuitable to the socialist state (Giurescu et al. 2003:510). Although the *Securitate* operated less violently in subsequent decades, it continued to maintain a powerful hold on the population – some pensioners told me that it rounded up people who failed to go to work and that one dared not speak openly against the regime because of the chilly response this provoked from the *Securitate*.²⁵

The labor-intensive nature of people's lives, the impact of oppressive work on people's physical and psychological health, and the failure of the party-state to completely satisfy people's aspirations for consumption while at the same time making them feel manipulated and afraid (Verdery 1996:26-28) together contributed to many forms of resistance against the socialist state.²⁶ Work absenteeism and tardiness, especially among commuters, were common problems faced by industrial managers

²⁴ This project was launched in 1949 to provide a shorter (by approximately 240 km. or 150 mi.) route between the Danube River and the Black Sea (Spulber 1954). Many thousands of political prisoners were forced to participate in its construction, a large number of whom perished in the process.

²⁵ This did not keep people from bantering about the *Securitate*. One woman told me that the following joke was common under socialism (and remained in vogue today): a man enters a store to purchase pate. He finds three varieties, one made from rabbit brains, the second from cow brains and the third from secret service members' brains. The third variety is exorbitantly expensive relative to the other two, provoking the man to ask why it costs so much. The vender's response: 'do you realize how many secret police we had to kill to make it?'

²⁶ Despite the fact that Romania had the largest communist party membership per capita in the Soviet bloc, Eyal et al. suggest that a high degree of "social closure" within the Romanian party-state undermined its legitimacy to the population. Unlike in several other Soviet bloc countries, such as neighboring Hungary, in Romania the state bureaucracy was relatively impenetrable and highly nepotistic, thus cutting it off from the population (1998:29).

because much of the population had to perform a “second shift,” typically in agriculture (Cole 1981:95). Many participated scornfully in “voluntary” work assignments (Verdery 1996:23), evidence of which appears in Adrian Tomescu’s life history. Workers could obtain benefits from their employers, including time off to engage in subsistence agricultural activities, by offering their labor when enterprise managers desperately needed it (Kideckel 1993:103, Verdery 1996:23).²⁷ Despite wielding this power and subtly resisting in various ways, the socialist state remained fundamentally unchallenged. It was only when a severe decline in the domestic and global economies occurred that the Communist party-state began to lose its grip on power.

The Socialist State’s Decline (1978-1989)

After nearly a quarter century of unparalleled expansion, the economy of Romania began to experience a steep decline toward the end of the 1970s. This downturn took place as a result of a number of circumstances, chief among which was Romania’s accumulation of massive debt through borrowing from western governments and financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as noted above. These loans did little to further develop the country, largely being directed toward the importation of petroleum and foodstuffs such as beef, pork and poultry given massive problems with animal production in the 1970s instead of being invested in improvements to cooperative farms and to the industrial sector, which were labor-intensive and increasingly inefficient. Despite partial adherence to IMF recommendations to expand

²⁷ This power was the result of one of socialism’s greatest weaknesses: inputs needed for production were regularly unavailable as a result of a practice among enterprise managers of hoarding resources. When inputs needed for production were finally assembled, managers relied on laborers to work long hours in order to fulfill output quotas (Verdery 1996:22-23).

the export of some manufactures and decrease imports, a severe trade deficit aggravated the mounting crisis. When the worldwide market price of petroleum rose in 1978, Romania's dependence on foreign oil worsened its debt from 3.6 billion U.S. dollars in 1977 to 10.2 billion by 1981 (Deletant 2002:434-435, Jackson 1981:264, 266).²⁸

As this crisis unfolded in Romania, a fundamental transformation of western capitalist economies was taking place. Many of the basic features of these formerly Fordist economies – large-scale production of industrial goods; relatively heavy state regulation of corporations in areas such as wage policy and workers' rights; the existence of labor unions that wielded significant power over collective bargaining agreements; improvements in people's access to social insurance, health care and education – were being eroded as a new model for structuring capitalist economies began to be followed, the post-Fordist or neoliberal model. This process rested on increasing the flexibility and rapidity of production and innovation within enterprises. The power of unionized workers declined as they were replaced with relatively disenfranchised pools of labor increasingly located in underdeveloped countries and available for recruitment with relative caprice. Employment in manufacturing gave way to service-sector jobs lacking benefits earlier gained by the industrial labor force (Harvey 1989:132-140, 147-172, Harvey 2005).

Unlike in many of the other Soviet bloc countries, leaders in Romania were generally very reluctant to engage constructively with this far-reaching transformation of capitalism, a stance that contributed to the country's crisis. Instead of setting forth a reform agenda to stimulate economic development, Ceaușescu refused to call for major

²⁸ A powerful earthquake in 1977 and flooding in 1980 and 1981 as well took a toll on the economy by disrupting industrial production and output in the agricultural sector. These forced leaders to reschedule debt to foreign countries in hard currency (Shafir 1985:107).

change to the development trajectory followed since the end of the Second World War.²⁹ Instead, Romania held on to its command economic system and continued to depend heavily on other Comecon countries for its markets (Daianu 2000:6). Despite grumbling within the ruling elite, few people were able to challenge Ceaușescu's power as a result of a policy under his administration of regularly rotating cadres from one government post to another and his penchant for installing sycophantic bureaucrats in powerful positions. Ceaușescu's authority was further concretized through a notorious cult of personality, the central purpose of which was to convince the population of his omnipresent, paternalist guidance over society and economy (Deletant 2002:431-432, Judt 2005:24, Mazower 1998:371).

As true throughout the Soviet bloc, the severe economic downturn in Romania manifested itself very differently from the trends that began to unfold in western capitalist countries in the 1970s. While the intertwined threats to economic stability of inflation and unemployment grew rapidly in the capitalist West over that decade, in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union the decline was marked by widespread shortages in basic consumer goods and deterioration in the quality of manufactured products. In Romania, these problems grew especially severe following the implementation of stringent austerity measures beginning in 1982, the primary goal of which was the complete erasure of foreign debt by the end of the decade (Deletant 2002:436, Judt 2005:623).

One result of the chronic shortages was the surfacing of an extensive second, or informal, economy (Kideckel 1993:126), a process which took place throughout the

²⁹ This was observed, for example, in the state's duplicitous undermining of a campaign it had launched to encourage self-administration (*autogestiune*) of industries by only ostensibly providing greater autonomy in decision-making to worker's councils (Nelson 1981:188).

Soviet bloc in this period (Verdery 1996:27, Galasi 1998, Ledeneva 1998, Sampson 1989, Stark 1989, Wedel 1986). One ethnographer observed this sector come to life in electricians repairing equipment on the side, bakers using ovens at “consumer cooperatives” to make bread for family and friends and welders building animal cages and fixing bicycles for their associates (Kideckel 1993:126). I gained a small glimpse into this from a friend in Bucharest who described how, as a girl, she delivered pig meat by bicycle to a range of people at the request of her parents, one of whom worked in the pork industry. She was told never to tell anyone of the purpose for her trips. In many cases, services such as these were exchanged for material goods that could not be obtained on the official market; as the economy declined throughout the 1980s and consumer goods grew more and more difficult to purchase in stores, informal transactions became ever more essential to household maintenance. Having a well-maintained vertical and horizontal network of interpersonal connections and “pull” made a big difference in what consumer goods one had (Sampson 1983:75-77). Second economy activities added to the population’s work load, many peasant-workers commuting in the early morning hours to jobs in factories, then returning home in the afternoons to perform informal tasks or to work in agriculture. One consequence of such work schedules was exhaustion, a phenomenon which Kideckel documents (1993: 101, 121) and which a number of my informants said was true about their experiences of work under socialism.

The widespread shortage of consumer goods furthermore forced people to expend much time and energy standing in line and often traveling great distances in order to obtain basic household items. One woman, Elena Iorga, told me that she and her husband, both educated and holding relatively important positions in industry and the

state bureaucracy, respectively, regularly woke on Saturday mornings at four o'clock to go to a nearby town to procure food for their family. As noted above, in many other households, pensioners took up this task while their children worked in the formal economy. In this environment of material scarcity, urban women experienced the challenge of preparing meals with limited resources, a problem further exacerbated by the initiation of food rationing in 1982, which reduced the amount of bread, sugar, flour, eggs, margarine and other basic foodstuffs each household could purchase monthly.³⁰

Cutbacks in public utilities and services, including electricity, water, heating, natural gas, and public transportation, were chronic. In winter, thermostats in most state offices were set as low as 14° C (57.2° F); hot water was available to households on average only once per week; buses, trams and trolleys were periodically stopped in recognition of "pedestrian day" (*ziua pietonilor*) and restrictions were placed on the amount of gasoline households could purchase (Deletant 2002:436, Judt 2005:623, personal communication with informants).³¹ Recycling waste became mandatory, long-time Bucharest friends who were school-aged at the time telling me of requirements, at times difficult to meet, to bring metal and other material to collection sites at schools.³² Concomitantly, social insurance entitlements were reduced, a law passed in 1977 increasing by five the number of years one was required to work in order to be eligible

³⁰ One woman in her late 60s told me about the "unbelievable" (*de necrezut*) culinary inventiveness women developed as a result of this rationing. Given that all of the ingredients to properly make mayonnaise were very difficult to obtain, many came up with novel ways of making this condiment, including beating eggs in sunflower oil or dissolving corn puffs in water and adding sunflower oil to the mixture. She also described people brewing "tea" with sugar candy. Predictably, all of these processes involved using domestically produced goods.

³¹ Humor played a role in easing the burden of these austerity measures. Many puns and jokes were exchanged regarding the cutbacks, including the following exclamation one friend recalled overhearing: "Spring has arrived, how wonderful! Now we can head to the fields to collect snails for dinner!"

³² Gille (2007) describes recycling and other waste management initiatives in socialist Hungary, to a degree countering the widely held belief that socialist regimes were ecologically unfriendly. See, however, Carter and Turnock, eds. (1996) for an examination of ecological degradation in several Soviet bloc countries.

for a full pension and lowering the benefit amount one could receive (Mihăiță 2003:5). Government revenue for health care was curtailed, contributing to a resurgence of a number of public health problems, including tuberculosis, which as shown in appendix D experienced an enormous flare-up in the 1980s (see also Didilescu et al. 1994 for data on TB). This downturn likewise led to a modest decline in life expectancy at birth. Reaching a historic peak of 69.8 years in 1976-1978, the number of years people could expect to live dropped below this level and remained there for the remainder of the socialist period (Bucur et al.:2004:61).³³ The birthrate dropped too from 1978 to 1983 (from approximately 20 births per 1000 inhabitants to 15) in spite of the continuing prohibition against abortion; it rose only slightly for the rest of the 1980s (Kligman 1998:53).

While the general population endured these austerity measures, substantial amounts of government revenue were pumped into a number of ostentatious capital projects. These included the construction of new urban centers in many cities, a process which often required the razing of historic neighborhoods. The destruction of large swathes of Bucharest to build the prodigious “House of the People” (*Casa Poporului*) was a particularly appalling example of this (Giurescu 1991). Plans to “systematize” the countryside, an initiative which would have involved the destruction of many villages and the construction of new towns, were also drawn up but largely left unfulfilled (Judt 2005:623, Sampson 1984).

³³ For men a peak of 67.5 years was reached in 1975-1977, a level unsurpassed until the end of the century. Women’s life expectancy reached a historic crest of 72.8 years in 1984-1986, falling below this until after the 1989 revolution (ibid.), a pattern which mirrored the intensity of economic decline and austerity from particularly from 1986 to 1989.

As had been the case earlier, public resistance to the socialist party-state remained limited even as the population's standard of living fell. Once again this had much to do with control exercised by the secret police, which showed its teeth, for example, when Jiu Valley miners audaciously attempted to draw attention to the reduction in quality of life and poor work conditions by striking and taking the First Vice President hostage in 1977. In response, Ceaușescu publicly promised support to the miners in order to end the stand-off, but in the months that followed the miners were eliminated (Giurescu et al. 2003:661). Similar retaliation occurred a decade later in the Transylvanian city of Brașov following an uprising of laborers at a factory that assembled tractors (Judt 2005:622).

In spite of the *Securitate*'s seemingly firm hold over society, the socialist republic was unraveling. The reasons for this were many, two of the most fundamental being the decline in the population's standard of living (Beck 1991:24) and the failure of the party-state to engage productively with the new form of capitalism in the West (Verdery 1996:33). Even socialist states that made significant changes to their economies (Hungary being a good example) did not however greatly improve either, suggesting that even reformed socialism had no future in an increasingly globalized, capitalist economy. Still, the Romanian economy was especially deeply flawed by its leaders' failure to enact reforms leading to a more workable economic system.

Without a doubt, the 1980s, especially its later years, was a bleak decade in the history of socialist Romania. Even if regional differences existed in the availability of food and basic household items – one woman described for instance finding toothpaste and shampoo in stores in Transylvania when these had long disappeared from the shelves in Galați – and not everyone in the same place experienced the shortages to the same

degree because of their particular web of informal ties, their access to land, their class background or for other reasons, in general the period was very difficult for the majority of people. In contrast to the conditions that would prevail following the 1989 revolution, however, in many respects the downturn of the 1980s was relatively less disruptive to life in Romania. The state continued to guarantee employment and income to the population even if these in many cases were very unsatisfactory and met only basic needs; price controls on the admittedly limited supply of consumer goods did largely remain in place; people continued to have access to free healthcare services despite these typically requiring a payment in kind; and pensions and social insurance, although eroded in value, were generally adequate. In addition – and perhaps most importantly – kinship ties and community networks remained largely intact during the 1980s and therefore could provide at least social, if not also material, support in what were unquestionably challenging times. Thus, ceremonial events – weddings and *pomeni* in particular – continued to be honored even if families were challenged to assemble the material items needed to hold them. All of this would change after the 1989 revolution, when disruption on many levels would alter life for most people in ways they had never before experienced and to a degree that to many would seem incomprehensible.

Post-Socialist Political Trends (1989-present)

The 1989 revolution in Romania was unique relative to those that occurred in other Soviet bloc states that year. Unlike in those countries, where generally peaceful protests and largely smooth transitions of power between communist rulers and democratic rivals took place, the December revolution in Romania resulted in bloodshed,

approximately 1,100 people dying and 3,350 being wounded in the upheaval (Siani-Davies 2005:97). It began on December 15 in the city of Timișoara in western Romania, where protests against the planned demotion of the Hungarian Reformist priest László Tőkés for public criticism he had expressed against the socialist regime quickly flared up into massive, violent demonstrations against the regime. Although the police, the *Securitate* and the military were called up to quell the protests, rioting took place in Timișoara, in the course of which many people were killed. A few days after the demonstrating had begun there, Ceaușescu decided to regain control by publicly addressing a large crowd gathered outside the Central Committee building in Palace Square in Bucharest. Although it remains very unclear precisely what happened during his speech – there are mixed reports of bombs, gunfire and fireworks being set off near the crowd and of people calling out for “revolution” – the gathering abruptly turned into a protest against the regime and then quickly developed into an all-out demonstration that spread to, and provoked, additional protest rallies in the capital and in other parts of the country. Violent force was used against the demonstrators in Bucharest and those in other cities where unrest broke out (including Galați), but fractions of the state security apparatus ultimately joined the army in supporting the people in their goal to unseat Ceaușescu and the Romanian Communist Party. This support seems to have been essential to the success of the popular efforts (Verdery and Kligman 1992:121). Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena did not survive the storm, the two fleeing Bucharest on December 22 and being executed on Christmas day that year following a hasty trial (Siani-Davies 1996, 2005).

Shortly after the Ceaușescus were removed from power, the National Salvation Front (*FNS – Frontul Național de Salvării*) – a party including many people who had held positions under Ceaușescu – assumed control of the government. Although on the surface the events leading to this dramatic change of authority by some accounts appeared to have been entirely spontaneous, to this day there remains debate over the role *FNS* leaders played in organizing the takeover of power. Some even argue that their subterfuge against the state began as early as 1971 (Verdery and Kligman 1992:119) or that it took place in collaboration with Moscow, with which, as noted earlier, Ceaușescu had a distant relationship. As a result, many do not even consider the events of December 1989 a revolution, instead calling it a coup, with one sector of the ruling elite taking control from another (see Siani-Davies 1996, 2005 for more on this). Other sentiments have prevailed. Especially when I lived in Bucharest in the mid-1990s it was common for people to sarcastically refer to the events of December 1989 as a “crowd” (*aglomerație*) that had gone out onto the streets to no purpose.

What is certain about the events surrounding the revolution is that more people perished in violence following the flight of the Ceaușescus from Bucharest than before their departure. While 162 people died from the initial outburst in Timișoara to the day the Ceaușescus escaped the capital, nearly a thousand were killed from December 22 to early January 1990. This devastation appears to have resulted from rumor that “terrorists” were threatening to take back control of the country from the *FNS*, such innuendo unleashing violent attacks in many parts of the country that were difficult to keep under control because word of terrorists was reinforced by reporting on the radio and on television – in other words, an enemy that threatened to thwart the

“revolutionaries” efforts was created and had to be put down. Many innocent people paid with their lives because of this (Siani-Davies 2005:122-131).

The first marginally democratic election in Romania since the onset of socialist rule in 1947 was held in May 1990, returning the populist *FNS* to power. This political party was headed by Ion Iliescu, who had been a county-level First Party Secretary during socialism, and it largely included former apparatchiks, military personnel and officials of the secret police who to varying degrees had opposed Ceaușescu’s rule yet sought to retain the power and privilege they had accrued under his regime (Gallagher 1995:223, Verdery 2003:95). Although this party suffered from internal factionalism, the opposition was less well-financed, had far fewer connections with the political elite and suffered cumbersome organizational problems (Carothers 1996:39). It also consisted of a dizzying array of political parties professing divergent platforms, some of which succeeded in coming together as the National Convention for the Establishment of Democracy (*CNID – Convenția Națională pentru Instaurarea Democrației*) only in December 1990.

FNS leaders engaged in a number of tactics to hold on to power. They maintained control over the media and allowed the still powerful secret police to continue exercising influence over political life and public opinion, which provided the *FNS* with a base for challenging opposition political parties (Tismăneanu 2003:236-237). They engaged in an illegal transfer of subsidies from state-owned enterprises to newly established private firms (Verdery 1996:196-197) – an early example of the wide-reaching corruption characteristic of the post-socialist era. *FNS* affiliates grew even wealthier by extracting the socialist-era savings from a large portion of the population with a slew of pyramid

investment schemes set up between 1990 and 1994 (Verdery 1996:197), a maneuver that seriously aggravated the impact on average citizens of the economic downturn in the years immediately following the revolution. Worse still, they employed overtly violent means to counter challenges to their authority. In January, February and June 1990 and in September 1991, for example, they emboldened miners from the Jiu Valley to descend upon the capital in order to “defend” the country against various opposition forces. Perhaps most notorious was the June 1990 *mineriade*, as these actions came to be called. In this case, the miners attacked a group of anti-government protesters who for two months had been encamped in University Square, a central location in Bucharest. Moreover, they violently went after students and politicians opposing the *FNS*. Most miners contend that the bloodshed resulting from this and the other marches had hardly been planned, it instead having been stoked by the *FNS*-controlled security apparatus in the capital (Beck 1993, Kideckel 2008:115).

This is not to say that the *FNS* was a smoothly-operating political machine. Major conflict erupted between President Iliescu and his Prime Minister, Petre Roman, for a number of reasons. A prominent one was that Roman promoted a relatively quick reorganization of the economy along market capitalist principles, a plan about which Iliescu was relatively unenthusiastic. Iliescu and several *FNS* government officials also clashed on the issue of the *Securitate* files. One *FNS* deputy, Claudio Iordache, attempted in 1991 to have a bill passed that would have made it necessary for officials of all branches of government to be investigated for former ties to the *Securitate*, but the bill was somehow “lost” before receiving full review by the Senate. Iordache ultimately resigned because of the debacle. These tensions within the *FNS* led to the splintering of

the party in 1992, Iliescu and his supporters leaving to form the *FDSN* (*Frontul Democratic al Salvării Naționale*), which in national elections that year regained power (Gallagher 1995:115-117).

In spite of these political conflicts a number of democratic changes did begin to take place, albeit gradually, first under the *FNS* and subsequently under the *FDSN* (and, later, the *PDSR* or *Partidul Democrației Sociale din România*, the new name of the party beginning in 1993). Civil society organizations championing a profuse number of activities outside the state's immediate control were founded, which offered the promise of democratic social reform. Prominent among these were non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for minority groups, including women, the Roma/Gypsies, pensioners and others – indeed, following this trend, the Pensioners' Foundation in Galați was formed in the 1990s. This is not to say that mass social activities outside the state's immediate control were devoid from life under socialism; as Hann (1996:8) points out, in some countries in Eastern Europe these were widespread (meaningfully excepting Romania in the 1980s, he notes). Still, a marked increase in such activity began, even if only fitfully, after the end of socialism. The blossoming of civil society did not proceed entirely without restraint, however, since some newly-formed foundations and associations were subject to strict regulations set by donors and government authorities.³⁴ In other cases, NGO endeavors were spoiled by corruption, including staff absconding with funds for their personal benefit.

³⁴ See Mandel (2002) for discussion of civil society development in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the post-socialist era. One central point that she makes (285-286) is that some civil society organizations that have emerged in the region are not non-governmental given the state financing they receive and the tight regulatory control they undergo. The Russian government's enactment in 2007 of stringent laws governing NGOs is a striking example of this. Put perhaps more positively, Hann (1996:9) states that indeed civil society is not separate from the state but that the relationship between the two is not necessarily antagonistic.

With time, elections became more democratic in Romania (Tismăneanu 2003:236) despite tactics by the *FNS* and its political heirs to undermine them by thwarting the registration of competitors (Stark and Bruszt 1998:47, Carothers 1996:46) and by other means. A number of key state institutions began to undergo reform, but many problems persisted as was evident, for example, in attempts to transform the judicial system (Carothers 1996:55-56), which suffered from a lack of independence from the government, a problem persisting to the present day. These hesitant steps toward the consolidation of democracy in the early years following the revolution led one analyst to designate Romania a “gray-area” within the former socialist world because neither remarkable progress nor major setbacks were occurring (Carothers 1996). Others offered somewhat more encouraging assessments given the country’s increasing openness to the West (Pop-Elecheș 2001:9).³⁵

The national election in 1996 at first glance appeared to be a major win for democratic reformers. The election, which most monitors agreed was largely free and fair, brought Emil Constantinescu, rector and professor in the Department of Geology at the University of Bucharest, and the Democratic Convention of Romania (*CDR – Convenția Democratică din România*) to power with an impressive majority.³⁶ It appealed to a number of segments of the population – I recall palpable excitement among educators in Bucharest with Constantinescu’s win – because of the programmatic counterpoint it offered to Iliescu’s party. The *CDR*’s platform included pledges to end

³⁵ The *PDSR* government, for example, gained Romania’s acceptance into the Council of Europe and shepherded its accession to NATO’s Partnership for Peace alliance.

³⁶ The *CDR* received 30.2% of the vote. In coalition with the Union of Democratic Socialists (*USD – Uniunea Social Democrat*) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (*UDMR – Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*), the largest party representing the Hungarian minority, the *CDR* formed a government (Pop-Elecheș 2001:2).

corruption; to accelerate the transformation of Romania into a capitalist market economy; to resolve outstanding problems related to the restitution of property confiscated by the socialist regime and to open the secret police files to public scrutiny (Tismăneanu 2003:234). This “reform-minded” government largely failed to achieve these goals for several reasons, including in particular the development of a major economic recession in 1997 that continued for several years, resulting in an overall increase in unemployment, inflation and poverty. Corruption remained endemic to political life, a number of scandals severely tarnishing the *CDR*’s image, and limited progress was made in the privatization of state-owned property. Adding to all this, the *CDR* coalition persistently suffered internal disputes – these in fact became so serious that in 1998 the government collapsed (Pop-Elecheș 2001:6-7, 9).

The inability of the Democratic Convention (*CD – Convenția Democratică*), as the *CDR* was renamed, to fulfill many of its campaign promises resulted in a significant decline in its political fortunes. In the 2000 national election it was removed from office, losing entirely its parliamentary representation (Pop-Elecheș 2001:1-5). The *PDSR* returned to power, Ion Iliescu once again becoming president, and the far-right Greater Romania Party (*PRM – Partidul România Mare*) staged a substantial electoral victory.³⁷ While this change in the political topography resulted in large measure from both widespread disapproval with the Constantinescu government and the economic crisis, the *PDSR*’s appeal to people was heightened further by the party’s movement toward the political center. Given the *CD*’s disrepute, the *PDSR* no longer had to rely on populist

³⁷ The *PDSR* refused to form a government with the *PRM*, instead assembling a minority government with the Democratic Party (*PD – Partidul Democrat*), the National Liberal Party (*PNL- Partidul Național Liberal*) and *UDMR*. The *PDSR* earned 36.6% of the vote and the *PRM* 19.5%, allowing these two parties to take the greatest number of seats in the Parliament (Pop-Elecheș 2001:2, 7).

tactics and the use of ardently nationalist proclamations to earn the population's favor, its leaders instead advancing a platform that featured European Union accession, the democratization of political institutions, greater inclusion of ethnic minorities in the economic and political life of the country and a soft approach to economic transition (Pop-Elecheș 2001:10).

Moderate achievements were made in a few of these areas during the 2000-04 mandate of the *PDSR*, the name of which was yet again changed, this time in 2001 to the Social Democratic Party (*PSD – Partidul Social Democrat*). Most of my research took place while this party was in power. Macroeconomic stabilization began to set in as was seen in a decline in inflation, a reduction in unemployment in some sub-sectors of the economy and an easing of poverty among certain groups of people. In general, however, the labor market remained grossly “dysfunctional” (Gross and Tismăneanu 2005:149) and a sizable majority of the population continued to live without material certainty (more on both of these problems below). Moreover, the consolidation of democracy still remained incomplete and both high- and low-level corruption persisted, for which European Commission officials calibrating Romania's eligibility for EU accession regularly criticized the *PSD* government (e.g., A.B. 2004:1, 3). Furthermore, the *PSD*, akin to its predecessors, was claimed to hinder the independent functioning of the judiciary and the media. In fall 2004, the Coalition for a Clean Parliament (*Coaliție pentru un Parlament Curat*), an alliance consisting of the ProDemocracy Association, the Romanian Academic Society and several other civic organizations, added to these allegations by asserting that a large number of *PSD* members and a small number of opposition party members running for parliamentary office in the 2004 national election

were “incompatible” (*incompatibili*) as public servants.³⁸ The coalition claimed they had collaborated with the secret police during the socialist regime; had held influential positions in the Romanian Communist Party; had failed as public officials to report conflicts of interest; had been accused of fraud and/or had engaged in other purportedly corrupt acts (Gross and Tismăneanu 2005:148-149, Mungiu-Pippidi 2005: 154-155, N.A. 2004d:2).

Given its poor record of political reform and limited success with economic development, the *PSD* lost considerable power in local and national elections in 2004. A coalition of the Liberal Party (*PNL – Partidul Național Liberal*) and the Democratic Party (*PD – Partidul Democrat*) – together, the *PNL-PD* – succeeded in removing the *PSD* government. Their platform was similar to the *PSD*’s in their goal of European Union accession and in their plans to tackle corruption. As I will describe in chapter seven, the *PNL-PD* was especially clever at capitalizing in their campaigning on some people’s concerns about high-level corruption. Their promulgation of a distinctly pro-American and neoliberal economic agenda – the *PNL-PD* president, Traian Băsescu (former mayor of Bucharest), promising his government would build an alliance with Washington and London – marked a significant change from the past. Passage of a flat tax in the *PNL-PD*’s first full month in power was quick evidence of the switch that had taken place. In the years since the election, foreign investment in the country has accelerated, the Romanian currency (called the leu; plural lei) has gained strength vis-à-vis many western currencies and macroeconomic stability has set in although the effects

³⁸ This public “blacklisting” of candidates for government office was curiously reminiscent of the purging referred to above of people considered unsuitable to the socialist regime. In this more recent case, of course, candidates were deemed “incompatible” with efforts to consolidate democracy rather than to build socialism.

of the global economic crisis linked to the sharp decline in the U.S. housing market in 2008 on Romania's "emerging" economy remain very uncertain. Price inflation was a mounting concern until the credit freeze led to a drop in oil prices and economic production around the world. A more serious concern now is foreign investment given the remarkable slowdown in the economies of the E.U. and Asia, on which Romania is highly dependent.

Romania received final approval to join the European Union on January 1, 2007 but serious problems continued to plague the *PNL-PD* government. Corruption remained relatively rampant, and poverty outside the major cities (particularly Bucharest) and among certain social groups (e.g., rural dwellers, pensioners, the Roma/Gypsies) persisted. The coalition's political stability has also been weak, President Băsescu being suspended in early 2007 following murky allegations that he had violated the constitution, but he returned to power in May of that year as a result of a referendum in which he received overwhelming support from the population, and he still remains a popular figure in Romania.

These political trends at the national level have not been followed lock step in the city and county of Galați. Continuing a practice common to the post-socialist period of electing leaders representing social democratic parties – a practice that, according to a reliable source in Bucharest, has contributed to Galați being nicknamed "The Red City" (*Orașul Roșu*) in the post-socialist era – the *PSD* mayor (Nicolae Dumitrescu) was reelected in June 2004. The Humanist Party of Romania (*PUR – Partidul Umanist Român*), with which the *PSD* later formed a loose coalition (called *PSD+PUR*), took control of the county prefecture. The county of Galați voted for the *PSD* candidate

(Adrian Năstase) in the 2004 national election although he received there the second narrowest margin of victory in the nation at 50.45%.³⁹

Post-Socialist Economic and Social Trends (1989-present)

As mentioned above, the economic and social changes in Romania after the revolution have been of such a disruptive nature that even the hardship of the 1980s pales in comparison. This has been evident, for one, in the widespread loss of employment, especially among blue-collar workers (Kideckel 2002:120, 2008:92-96). Abraham (2000:21) points out that in the first decade following the revolution 19 percent of the population experienced unemployment (*șomaj*) and that in the same period another nine percent left jobs in restructuring enterprises in exchange for monetary benefits, a process known as *disponibilizări* (literally, “discharging”). The privatization of socialist enterprises, although much slower than in several former Soviet bloc countries in Central Europe,⁴⁰ is a major factor here, along with a large decline in productivity especially during significant economic downturns in the 1990s within parts of the manufacturing sector still in state hands. Until very recently, lack of foreign direct investment in the Romanian economy, slow growth within the service sector and the failure of goods manufactured in Romania to gain a competitive edge on the global market, unnecessary when Romania had secure trade ties with other Comecon members, have also had a

³⁹ Only in the Transylvanian county of Hunedoara did Năstase have a thinner margin of victory, 50.37% (N.A. 2004e:1). The PSD candidate’s marginal victory in Galați resulted partly from the opposition presidential candidate’s background as a sailor. Many people in Galați, especially men, could identify with him given the city’s history as a port; their employment in the shipbuilding industry; their experiences as sailors; and the fact that Băsescu used the Romanian language in a manner with which the working-class could readily identify.

⁴⁰ The very reemergence of the category “Central Europe” signals the regional variation in transformations from socialism. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were re-included in this area not long after their revolutions from socialist rule, Romania, Bulgaria and other states to the south and east remaining within “Eastern Europe.” See Okey (1992) for discussion of this redefining of the region.

negative impact on employment (Daianu 2000:12-14, Smith 2006:30-31). The drop in employment has not, however, been uniform across Romania. Cities such as Galați have been among the hardest hit, especially as major enterprises, like *Sidex*, have been privatized.

A couple of trends have followed the removal of the socialist state's guarantee of full employment. One that immediately began after the revolution was growth in the number of people working in agriculture, many taking up work in this sector when they lost jobs in industry. Statistics show that from 1990 to '95 the proportion of people employed in farming underwent a significant increase from 29 to 40 (Verdery 2003:101-102).

Many people have been pushed into the informal economy or the black market – *la negru* – as it is popularly known in Romania. This sector consists of a wide variety of activities, including, e.g., construction, industrial labor and domestic service, examples of which some informants described personally since they had either worked *la negru* or had close contact with someone who had. Employment in the informal economy is characterized by low wages and a lack of social insurance benefits. Black market workers, furthermore, live without union guarantees and do not have access to unemployment insurance if they lose their jobs (Kideckel 2001, 2002:121-122). Engagement with this sector can involve experiencing geographic and social dislocation since finding employment on the black market may require moving to major economic centers like Bucharest or altogether emigrating from the country, a process I return to immediately below. This, too, is true of legitimate employment, many people who have lost work through restructuring having migrated to other parts of the country for work, as

we have already seen in the case of my landlord. Criminal activity as well has flourished in Romania. The country is a major source of trafficked sex workers (International Migration Organization 2001) and narcotics trafficking has thrived in part because of the disappearance of secure, legitimate employment.

A flood of people, especially middle-aged and younger men and women, has left the country since 1989 for employment in domestic services (such as eldercare), agriculture, health care, and manufacturing in a number of Western European and Middle Eastern countries, Italy and Spain being particularly popular destinations at least until the global economic crisis in 2008 began to negatively affect the Spanish economy in particular.⁴¹ Some of this employment is legal and in some cases Romanian citizens emigrate legally for such work; very often, however, illegal immigrants from Romania are pulled into illegitimate sectors of the economies of foreign countries, working for wages that, though high by Romanian standards, are low from a local perspective and without social insurance benefits attached to them.

The demographics here are truly staggering: according to most estimates (see, for example, Ofițeru 2007), from one to 1½ million people have left Romania for work abroad since 1989, figures which are probably modest given that a large percentage of the labor migrants is illegal. This has contributed to a decline in population since the revolution – reversing an upward trend since the Second World War. From 1990 to 2003 the number of people in Romania dropped from 23.2 to 21.7 million, a fall of 6.4 percent (Bucur et al. 2004:1). Both the county and the city of Galați have followed this pattern in part also because of labor migration, the former declining from 650,000 in 1990 to

⁴¹ See Cole and Booth (2007) for an account of the experiences of migrants to Sicily from several developing African and Asian countries.

623,000 in 2003 (Anuarul Statistic al României 2005b:2.5) and the latter from 326,000 in 1992 to 299,000 in 2004 (Giurescu et al. 2003:965). Significantly, much of this decline occurred after the privatization of *Sidex*.

Lack of employment does not, however, entirely explain the decline in population, at least two other interrelated processes also playing a role in the demographic downturn. One of these is that the birthrate has gone down markedly since the revolution. This is true even relative to the drop recorded in the 1980s, when the number of births per 1000 people was from 15 to 17 annually. In 1990, there were 13.6 births per 1000 inhabitants, and by 2003 the ratio was 9.8 to 1000 (Bucur et al. 2004:14-15). There are at least two prominent factors contributing to this decline: the repeal shortly after the revolution of the 1966 law restricting abortion and the economic instability, which has caused people to put off starting a family.

The public health crisis that followed the end of socialist rule in Romania and in other formerly socialist countries such as Russia, where it has been particularly severe within certain sub-populations partly because of hardship brought on by its transformation beginning in 1991 and the resources people had to cope with it, has also played an important role in the population decline. It has led to a troubling spike in mortality especially among middle-aged men – life expectancy within this cohort in Romania dropped to its lowest level in twenty-five years when in 1995-97 it declined to 65.2 years (see Bucur et al. 2004:61, Mureşan 1999, Shkolnikov 2001:917 for statistics and analyses of the crisis). Since 1989, the incidence of a broad range of illnesses – diseases of the circulatory system, malignant neoplasms, illnesses of the muscular-skeletal system such as osteoporosis, ailments of the endocrine system such as diabetes,

kidney disease and other maladies of the genito-urinary system, blood disorders including anemia, tuberculosis, accidents, suicides, poisonings and mental health problems (appendices C and D include data on morbidity and mortality since the revolution) – has risen starkly. This eruption of health conditions and the consequent drop in life expectancy is related to many processes, including the disinvestment in public health infrastructure mentioned above, the disruptions described in this section, the increase in violence and alcohol consumption that has occurred since the end of socialism and the proliferation of stress and strain in people's lives – all correlates of the transformation from socialism to capitalism (see Cornia and Panicià 2000, Field et al 2000, Garrett 2000, Mäkinen 2000 for details).

The withdrawal of the social safety net since 1989 has exacerbated the impact of unemployment in the post-socialist era. Shocking enough in itself, this change has been accompanied by an enormous rise in inflation that has made basic goods and services out of reach to ordinary citizens. Meanwhile the Romanian leu has rapidly lost value, dropping for example from approximately 2,000 lei to one U.S. dollar in the mid-1990s to an average of 32,700 lei to one U.S. dollar during 2004. Although these trends have not been unique to Romania, other former Soviet bloc countries experiencing similar changes (see Ferge 1997, Haney 1999, 2002), their effects on the Romanian population have been especially intense due to the country's relative underdevelopment and to the political instability described earlier, both of which have made the country relatively unattractive to outside investors.

Pensioners in Romania dramatize these dislocations. Their official income has failed to keep up with the rapid price increases. As will be shown in chapter four, this

has made it difficult for pensioners to manage expenses for basics, including food, health care, utilities, and transportation, and to pay for ceremonies and rituals. For now, I only explain some of the primary underpinnings of this crisis. The reduction in pension entitlements – a change that has been not only actual but also relative, with the ratio of pensions to salaries (the so-called “replacement rate”) dropping alarmingly in the post-socialist period⁴² – has resulted from a number of interrelated processes. These include the rise of unemployment and the growth of black market labor, as well as the diversion of government subsidies and bank credits to failing state-owned industries (de Menil et al. 1999:9, Smith 2006:30, Vasile and Zaman 2005:5) – all of these have reduced funding for the public sector, including the pension system. High-level corruption and wide-ranging tax evasion in this period, particularly obvious signs of a reduction in the Romanian state’s authority since 1989 (see Daianu 2000:16, Muço 2001 and Verdery 2003:112-113 for more on this), have meant that revenue for pensions and other social insurance programs has either been stolen or never been collected (Muço 2001:43, 47). Meanwhile, international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, have contributed to this problem by pressing Romanian officials to reduce public expenditures. There was also a policy, widely criticized by working-class pensioners and others I know, that was enacted shortly after the revolution under the Petre Roman government that allowed early retirement to many working people. In the long-term this has added more strain to the reeling pension system by increasing the ratio of pensioners to workers. While prior to the policy’s enactment there were approximately two workers to one pensioner, today the ratio stands at two workers to three pensioners (Daianu 2006).

⁴² In the mid-1990s, the average pension in Romania was estimated to be 43.1 percent of the average salary, one of the lowest replacement rates in Eastern Europe (Mihăiță 2003:7). By 1998, this rate had worsened, the average pension approximating 36 percent of the average salary (Gomulka 2000:3).

Certainly the aging of the population has helped to tip the scale in this direction since 1989 as well, but the Roman policy did not help matters. The magnitude and suddenness of this turn is cause for great concern because of the accompanying reduction in contributions to the system.⁴³

The scattering of kin and the breakdown of community ties have been other major changes to life in Romania since 1989. This returns us to the Niculescus' *pomană* feast that Mihnea and his family did not attend. The very fact that they could hold the gathering, which according to the ritual calendar was not even necessary, indicated that the Niculescus were a working-class family with greater means, including my monthly rent payments, than other people of the same class background. Still, the absence of Mihnea and his family revealed the breadth of the transformation since 1989. The cultural value of *pomeni* explains why this is so. *Pomeni* are ritual events that continue to hold meaning to people; few informants – including educated, young friends in the capital – dismiss them as old-fashioned or too “traditional.”⁴⁴ Honoring *pomeni* customarily involves following a strict schedule: one is required “to give *pomană*” (“*a da de pomană*”) nine days, 20 days, 40 days, three months, six months, one year, three years and seven years following someone's death; in addition, annually there are over two dozen major Orthodox holidays during some of which *pomană* is given and it is also offered on the “name days” (*zile onomastice*) of the deceased. The practice involves

⁴³ In comparison, the ratio of workers to pensioners in the U.S. is higher than that in Romania. This trend has been fairly consistent historically, but the number of pensioners to workers in the U.S. has increased significantly especially over the past half-century. For example, in 1981 there were 3.2 workers to each pensioner, but the estimate for 2030 is two workers to one pensioner (Olson 1982:4).

⁴⁴ I have had personal contact with only one person in Romania, a professional living in the capital, who outwardly regarded *pomeni* negatively, considering them a waste of time and shameful. No one I met in Galați expressed such sentiments, even if one person, my landlady, said that she was against the idea of having to follow the calendar in honoring the dead, Daciana wanting to give *pomană* whenever it suited her. Working-class people of all ages, in other words, considered honoring the dead vital.

holding feasts at home, like the Niculescus did, or at someone's gravesite or assembling packets of food, which in many cases are blessed by a priest, and distributing them at or near churches and in cemeteries to pensioners and other poor people such as Roma/Gypsies who gather in these places, as I show below. The cultural significance of *pomeni* echoed too in people's telling me that the custom had existed for a long time, some even saying that it was practiced by the Dacians, a people who inhabited present-day Romania prior to their conquest by the Roman Empire. Informants debated, however, whether the practice was unique to Romania, some believing that it was also common to Russia, Bulgaria and other countries with large Eastern Orthodox populations. But most did agree that *pomană* rituals varied from one region of Romania to another and between rural and urban areas, some pointing out that in villages the transfer of material goods was much greater than in urban centers.

Traditionally *pomeni* served to bring together kin and community in Romania. Today they are increasingly a source of stress because of the demands they place on people's budgets, but people do not escape such feelings by avoiding giving *pomană*. As will be shown in one woman's story in chapter four, the moral and social strain caused by avoidance is equally stressful. People worry that their deceased kin will suffer in the afterlife or enact some sort of retribution, and they express concern about how others, the living that is, will view them if they do not fulfill this obligation. Even so, cutbacks in *pomană* distributions have occurred since 1989, and they fail to reunite kin and community in the way they once did. This "ritual decline," with all its social implications and the stress it provokes, is similar to what other ethnographers have observed in other former Soviet bloc countries (Creed 2002).

The post-socialist processes described here – the growth in unemployment; the decline in pensions; the rise in inflation; the drop in the value of the currency; the increase in incidence of a range of health conditions; the dispersal of kin – have deeply influenced the lives of pensioners in Galați. This remains true despite the improvements to the broader economy described in the discussion above of political life since 2004. One also should not be taken in by positive reports issued in recent years that the standard of living in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has gone up significantly (e.g., Alam et al. 2005, Dugger 2005, Havrylyshyn 2006). Although these quantitative studies do show an overall easing of poverty in the region,⁴⁵ it is important to bear in mind that large pockets of poverty persist especially in the Balkan countries and many of the former Soviet republics – including among working-class pensioners in Galați. In fact, in Romania one observes a solidifying of the class structure that has developed since the revolution. These are the new rich and the impoverished majority. One finds a middle class only in recent years and only in major metropolitan areas such as Bucharest.

Conclusion

This history has traced several key political, economic and social processes since the end of the First World War. Most importantly, I described the array of changes that occurred with the “transformation to socialism” beginning in 1947. These included the development of the country’s industrial capacity and the agricultural sector, a process which gave work to many people. They also included the expansion of the social safety

⁴⁵ Dugger reports that forty million people in the region left poverty from 1998 through 2003, which meant that one in eight households were below the poverty line. Although this marks an improvement from an estimated one in five households living in poverty earlier in the 1990s, she points out that there remain 61 million impoverished people in the region.

net and improvements in the population's access to education and – of central importance here – to health care. I also described about the general macroeconomic stability that characterized the socialist years, which, for one, made inflation all but unknown, and I pointed out how ritual life remained relatively stable during that period. This development of socialism, I emphasized, was incomplete and imperfect, but it still helped to raise the standard of living of a people who in many cases had been living in extreme poverty in the previous historical period.

Since 1989, Romania has undergone a fundamental transformation, the state socialist system being replaced by a neoliberal capitalist one. This has meant a great deal to people, in particular those who have spent most, or all, of their earlier years under socialism. No longer can they rely on the certainty of full employment, stable prices, adequate pensions, complimentary healthcare services, and free and high-quality education, nor can they expect that their kin will be at their side to provide support and to share in the cycle of rituals that are important to the reproduction of everyday life. Instead, they are surrounded by immense uncertainty, a condition which has made stress a chronic feature in their lives. At the same time this history has described the gradual, indeed fitful, emergence of democracy in Romania since the end of socialism. This, too, has had an impact on how life is lived such that today it is much more possible than under socialism to call for, indeed to demand, change from the government by voting or engaging in political activism.

The chapters that follow personalize this history through an exploration of many dimensions of the lives of working-class pensioners in Galați. I show both the imprint of these historical processes and the responses people have had to them. This begins with a

set of life histories that concentrates in particular on the experiences today's pensioners had under socialism. I briefly contrast these with vignettes from the lives of a younger woman and man, which help to underscore a central point of the chapter – historical change has a profound affect on people's lives and well-being

Chapter Three

Life Histories of Working-Class Women and Men from Moldova

Introduction

My primary purpose in carrying out fieldwork in Galați was to learn about the contemporary lives of pensioners. This did not keep me from exploring pensioners' experiences in earlier years; indeed, learning about such experiences was critical for understanding the meaning of the post-socialist transformation to older men and women. At the same time, my focus on the elderly did not keep me from becoming acquainted with many people of the younger generation. As a means of introducing the main focus of this dissertation – the rupture following the end of socialism – this chapter presents the “life histories” (a problematic concept I theorize below) of several retired working-class men and women I came to know, and it explores some dimensions of the lives of two younger people. Although each person is unique in certain ways – including their personalities and backgrounds – their experiences are generally common to working-class people in Galați who lived through the same historical periods. In these “individual” profiles, in other words, a number of large-scale historical processes passed through by others comes to life.

The first history is of a woman, Victoria Dobre, who, like many women in this period, performed domestic and agricultural labor in the countryside while her husband commuted weekdays to Galați for work, their family moving to the city when housing became available. The second tells of a man, Vasile Maniu, who in his younger years worked on a collective farm and became involved in local politics, ultimately becoming mayor of his village; later, like so many others he accepted employment in Galați in

heavy industry because of the higher income it offered, but, also like many other people, he continued to contribute his labor to the agricultural collective in his village. A woman, Raluca Barbu, who gained technical training that led to employment in light industry, a pattern increasingly common among women in that period, is the subject of the third history. It also describes her simultaneously and often single-handedly carrying out domestic responsibilities and periodically performing agricultural labor in the village in which she grew up. The final history recounts the life of a man, Adrian Tomescu, who at a young age left his village for the military and later received training to become a plumber, never returning “home” to work in farming; instead, he worked in a small city, combining his regular duties with what he oxymoronicallly called “mandatory voluntary” (*obligat voluntar*) work all but required of many people by the state. These histories are juxtaposed with descriptions of the lives of a woman, Constanța Iorga, and a man, Costică Roman, who were both born in the 1960s and whose fragmented work lives make an important contrast.

Taken together, these life histories are important for many reasons. For one, they illustrate the impact of several of the major changes brought about by the postwar transformation to socialism described in the previous chapter. We learn much about the arduous labor today’s pensioners performed under socialism as Romania industrialized. We also gain insight into many of the benefits people gained as the economy expanded in that era in part through their efforts, including job security, steady income that was not threatened by inflation and access to free, or low-cost, education, healthcare services, housing and much more. In this chapter we observe Victoria, for example, taking advantage of newly available healthcare services – we witness her going to a local

dispensary for medical advice and treatment, taking her son to Galați for emergency care and heading to Bucharest for surgery. Telling in all these accounts is her lack of any mention of these services having been an expense to her. Compelling enough on their own, such experiences are made even more striking by their comparison with the conditions faced by the younger generation. We observe that their lives are defined by jobs offering poor pay and no benefits, periods of unemployment and little or no access to the resources guaranteed their elders. In a vignette from Costică's life, for example, we observe the very limited access to healthcare services people now experience in the post-socialist period, a matter on which I expand in chapter five.

Several compelling examples of the attribution of physical and psychological health conditions under socialism to "too much work," which in the introductory chapter I said was common among pensioners, also appears in these histories. This is in marked contrast to the ascription of health problems to "stress" that is widespread today. The histories, in other words, reinforce the point made above that an etiology of illness prevailed under socialism that is quite different from the one we encounter today.

We also learn in these histories about the different attitudes toward the "self" between the two generations. I show that most of the older men and women express satisfaction in themselves because of both the achievements they realized as the socialist economy expanded and the challenges they faced in their lifetimes, including completing schooling, performing demanding work, raising children and building or purchasing a home. I point out that the younger generation in the meantime generally views itself as relatively unaccomplished, believing that it has failed to achieve its potential or that it has changed for the worse because of the inadequacy of its education, work instability,

inability to afford housing and other matters. Discussion of this and the other themes reveals the imprint of broader political and economic “histories,” socialist and post-socialist, upon the population. My central argument in this chapter is that the socialist state, albeit often at significant cost, afforded people of peasant origins in Moldova and neighboring regions more opportunities to experience achievement in at least some areas of their lives than has been the case for the younger generation in neoliberal capitalist Romania.

Theorizing the “Life History”

Before I present the life histories, theoretical discussion of this form of ethnographic data – the “life history” – is necessary, there being a prolonged disagreement among scholars about the kind of knowledge one can gain from such a source and the multiplicity of interpretive challenges it poses. Although scholars ascribe to myriad definitions of the “life history” (see Kratz 2001:132-134, Garro and Mattingly 2000:9 for a few examples), one way to neatly group these definitions is according to the degree to which they assert that the life history is a tool for gaining insight not only into people’s “personal” experiences but also into the broader historical processes through which they have lived. Some theorists contend that at base life histories tell more about individual lives than about the “way the world is” (Linde 1993:21) – this is an important theoretical perspective to which I give attention below when I describe several interpretive challenges involved in composing a life history, yet it is one which in general I find very limited.¹ More productive, I believe, is the construction and analysis of life

¹ This theoretical approach to the life history is evident in Linde’s reflection on how she became a linguist (1993:5). She describes the influence of family members and teachers but makes no reference to the

histories that also draws in the wider world, complete with all its complex and often contradictory processes. In my opinion, it goes almost without saying that these, too, give fundamental shape to people's lives. Mintz (1974) offers an instructive example of the latter approach in composing the history of one man's (named Taso) life.

Acknowledging that the history offers glimpses into Taso's unique experiences and characteristics, Mintz nevertheless concludes that in general Taso's life corresponds to broader political, economic and social changes taking place within Puerto Rican society in the mid-20th century. Consequently, were Mintz to have devoted time to gathering the life history of another person of the same or similar class and ethnic or racial background who had lived through the same historical period in Puerto Rico, he would have gained similar insights, always, of course, with personal twists unique to the individual. This is true in other cultural contexts, life histories giving ethnographers valuable insights into the "collective memories" of specific groups of people whose lives have followed roughly synonymous historical trajectories (Halbwachs 1992:38, 40).

This is not to say that collective memories are not open to contestation and possible reinterpretation by people both within and outside the "group"; histories are hardly static entities that over time are not susceptible to rearticulation by any number of people. For example, in recent years the collective memory of Japan's actions during the Second World War has undergone modification in some circles such that today the atrocities the government committed against many of its neighboring countries, including using "comfort women" for the pleasure of its military officials, have come under question (Hayashi 2008, Schneider 2008). This process, although limitedly, has occurred

impact on her career of broader political and economic processes, including women's improved access to higher education beginning in the 1960s and the specific material circumstances that allowed her to pursue a professional future in academia.

in Romania too, where the socialist regime has received some scrutiny by, for example, a historical commission, the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, set up in 2006 by President Băsescu (see Tismăneanu 2008, who headed the commission, for details). This process of challenging the collective memory in Romania, as with the one involving Japan and those in other countries, is certainly not without counter-challenges from any number of groups. The construction of collective memory is, in the end, an arena of immense conflict.

Still, there are discernible patterns one can draw from the life histories of a group of people that shares many social and economic characteristics and has lived through the same historical period. Accordingly, ethnographers can gain knowledge about the material lives and cultural backgrounds of their informants by collecting a selection of life histories. Such histories can offer insight into the perceptions people have of themselves and the beliefs they have about the historical periods through which they have lived. They can tell of the social relations people have maintained and the material conditions of everyday life. They may also provide information about actions people have undertaken in response to changes in their society and the impact of their initiatives on the world around them (Kratz 2001:132, Mintz 1974:253, Ochs and Capps 1996:26). In sum, life histories are testimonials about the political, economic and social contexts through which a people has lived.

In spite of their potential, there are many reasons for interpreting life histories with caution. Many scholars have pointed out that they are inherently fragmentary (Linde 1993:27, Mintz 1974:253, Ochs and Capps 1996:21). One basis for this may simply be that people forget about, or were never aware of, certain details regarding their

own pasts. In some cases, they may also remain silent about particular matters because of emotional discomfort (Ochs and Capps 1996:32-33) or distrust in the ethnographer's intentions – a likely “response” particularly in places like Romania where some past experiences were especially contested, such as the collectivization of agriculture under socialism (Verdery 2006). More often, perhaps, other, practical circumstances contribute to the discontinuous nature of a life history. Study participants may suffer serious health problems that interrupt the gathering of a history, as I show below was the case with Vasile, or they may simply prefer to talk to ethnographers about their present-day lives rather than their past experiences. Notwithstanding these possible barriers to ethnographers obtaining “complete” life histories, I believe that they do have the potential to provide substantial insight into the past, especially if the relationships between ethnographers and participants themselves have a long-term history. This is proven not only in the history Mintz compiled but also in other life histories ethnographers have written (e.g., Behar 1993, Crapanzano 1980) – all of these researchers knew their informants quite well. To varying degrees, this was the case with the men and women whose lives I present here. At any rate, I make the nature of my relationship with each person clear in the introductions to their histories.

The interpretive challenges involved in constructing life histories do not end here. Some theorists point out that the descriptions people give of past experiences may be problematic because they result in people's “imposing order” on experiences that in reality were quite nuanced or chaotic (Garro and Mattingly 2000:267). There may be many reasons that people do this. Some may do it in order to make a point about themselves – perhaps telling their life history, or some part of it, gives them the unique

opportunity to portray themselves as morally upright, a characterization that in reality may be inaccurate. Other people may simplify descriptions of former experiences without being fully conscious of doing so, their narrations making a point about their contemporary lives more than about their pasts (Capps and Ochs 1996:25). I suspect this goes on, for instance, when people in Romania offer renditions of life under socialism that appear nostalgic; such accounts probably tell us more about present-day hardships than give us accurate depictions of people's past experiences.

Numerous practical conditions may lead people to misrepresent their histories. These include the physical location in which they tell ethnographers about their pasts, as well as the presence of other people during such tellings and the amount of time devoted to the endeavor. Moreover, in some cultural contexts, particularly non-western ones, the construction of life histories may be affected by radically different understandings between researchers and informants about what exactly a "life history" is (Linde 1993:11). Behar (1993:11), for example, observed that her interlocutor likened the process of sharing her past to confessing to a religious authority. Such cultural differences can fundamentally influence what people relate about their histories, how they tailor descriptions of their personal experiences and why they convey what they do. Furthermore, the content and form of life histories can be influenced by the motivations for which people agree to share their pasts with ethnographers. Belief that they have lived a life worthy of recounting; eagerness to talk about experiences that are meaningful to them; desire for social contact; interest in supporting the intellectual endeavors of a student or scholar from a country viewed favorably, (as is generally the case for the U.S. as viewed by Romanians) and anticipated material benefit may all influence descriptions

people give to ethnographers of their histories. In the end, life histories may also be tacitly distorted by ethnographers through omission of data they deem irrelevant or through the rearrangement of information they have accumulated (Kratz 2001:128, Garro and Mattingly 2000:24, Ochs and Capps 1996:24).

These interpretive challenges are significant, yet they need not tie the hands of researchers. Sensitivity to their potential impact on data can serve as an antidote to their completely undermining a life history's validity. In the histories I gathered I attempted to maintain awareness of probable sources of bias. In introducing each history, I describe any possible outside influences on data I perceived and explain what I believe informants' motivations were for participating in this part of the research. While these undoubtedly affected the final outcome of this endeavor, these histories nevertheless offer unique and valuable insight into the past lives of working-class people in Galați, Romania.

“I Did It All with These Hands and This Back”:
Victoria Dobre's Life History

I became acquainted with Victoria Dobre at the recreational center early in 2004. A somewhat less regular attendee of the center than others, she nonetheless was familiar to many people there and her gregarious nature typically allowed her to readily join social activity in the place. When she learned I was interested in holding interviews with pensioners she strongly expressed a desire to participate, with eagerness saying she had a great deal to share about her life. As a result, we carried out a lengthy, recorded interview in the recreational center after everyone except a small group of men sitting some distance from us had left. The process went smoothly despite minor interruptions.

I was nevertheless concerned about the influence the formal setting, and our still incipient relationship, had had on our interaction. In the ensuing months I continued to get to know her during visits to the center, our relationship developing even further when she announced one day to several center visitors including me that she wanted to sublet a room in her apartment. I expressed interest, and we arranged for me to go to see the place.

During the visit I met her husband and was somewhat surprised to observe that they appeared to get along well – Victoria had described their relationship as tense and had said several times that their financial lives were separate.² Victoria fed me lunch, they showed me family photographs and we discussed the prospects of my joining them. Because I was locked into a prior lease, moving in was not immediately possible even though Victoria suggested I break off the lease, but we arranged that I would move in if I returned to Galați for additional research. As pointed out above, this came to pass, and I lived with the Dobres for a total of three months during visits in 2005 and 2006.

The life history is based on a wide variety of interactions with Victoria in a number of settings. We held formal conversations, like the center interview, usually at home alone or with her husband around in the kitchen or the room in which she watched television. I also learned much about her past through the informal, spontaneous exchanges that took place rather naturally since I was living in her home. Reflecting on our countless interactions, I on the whole believe Victoria had two motivations for sharing details about her past with me. Primarily, she genuinely felt her life was worth chronicling given her struggles and accomplishments. Indeed, she regularly expressed

² After moving in I observed tension between them, but I am fairly certain their incomes were not kept separate. Instead, Victoria's story of separation was much more likely a tactic to secure access to Foundation food packets: one could be cut off from them with a too high income.

appreciation for the opportunity to have her life documented given all that she had experienced. She was immensely proud of the family she created and of the other successes described in her history. At the same time, Victoria perceived herself as “the suffering one” (*suferinda*) because of the adversity and loss she had experienced, and she wanted this sentiment taken seriously. Meanwhile, from time to time I sensed that Victoria cultivated an image of suffering because of benefits she anticipated from it, including some she may have sought from me. Thus, her life stories to a degree were also a metacommentary on contemporary conditions, her occasional reminders of the pain she had suffered flowing from very real concerns in the here and now. In other words, one can interpret Victoria’s history, and the histories of all the people presented in this chapter, “from various angles,” as Ries has put it – they are, indeed, “small doorways into a complex system of meanings and values, ideologies, identities and life strategies” (1995:2). In spite of this important fact, I do feel that I gained accurate insight in particular into Victoria’s life because of all the time we spent together.

I have pieced together our conversations in the following history. Thus, its presentation does not follow the chronology in which the history was told. This resulted from my occasional interest in returning to periods of her life shortchanged in earlier conversations and from the unanticipated exchanges now and again about her past, as when my noticing strands of wool yarn on a kitchen chair led to revelations about her teenage years as a farm laborer.

Victoria Dobre was born in 1937 to a couple who lived in a small town along the Prut River, the Danube tributary forming the contemporary border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Her family, among the town’s small landholders, owned

approximately four hectares (or about ten acres) of property. Following the pattern common among rural inhabitants in this historical period, they derived the majority of their household income from working this and others' land. She was the last of eleven children, nearly half of whom, two girls and three boys, died in their first year of life, most likely succumbing to an infectious illness prevalent at the time.³

Among Victoria's earliest memories were her experiences during the Second World War, when she was six years old. She described the arrival of hostilities to her village in 1944 as a result of the Allied advances against Germany. This brought Russian soldiers into her town, and Victoria recalled that they forced civilians from their homes and confiscated private possessions, an experience her family was not spared. They concealed valuables, hoping the soldiers, whom she referred to as "pigs" (*porci*), would not take off with their property. She also recounted her memory of "being a refugee" (*refugiat*): Absent her mother, who at first refused to leave the home, her family fled the village, which was covered with the bodies of German soldiers, a recollection she illustrated by tossing rags onto the floor in the room where we sat. They settled in a field and created a shelter where her mother later joined them, remaining there for one to two months. During this time her family took cover whenever warplanes flew overhead, a memory that was evoked when we went fishing and a small plane passed low over us.

While the war continued to be waged, Victoria's childhood was disrupted again when she was sent to Bucharest to perform domestic service for a childless couple. A large landowner, on whose property her parents worked, facilitated this arrangement after

³ I do not recall Victoria being knowledgeable of her siblings' specific causes of death. Still, it is noteworthy that she was aware of their genders without having known them in person, suggesting they had remained spiritually important to her family, an attitude toward the deceased that I have stressed is common in Romania.

observing that Victoria was “industrious” (*harnică*) and could assist the daughter and daughter’s husband, who were busy medical professionals living in the capital, approximately 200 km. (120 mi.) from her village. Victoria, unaware of the purpose for being sent there, said she had anticipated she would attend school, given that she was approaching the age of seven. I also believe she did not know whether her parents were receiving financial compensation for her work or if they were even fully aware of the purpose of their daughter’s going to Bucharest. Instead of going to school, she performed various tasks, including buying bread and milk, staples as noted earlier which were regularly in short supply and consequently required standing in line to purchase. She endured physical abuse from the couple and lived through the Allied bombing raids on the capital in August 1944. She described feeling frightened and trapped in the situation, at one point seeking comfort from nuns at a church and ultimately freeing herself from the approximately nine month ordeal by tearfully complaining to the doctor’s mother during a visit she made. She then returned to her village in Moldova.

At the age of eight Victoria began to attend school near her home, but this was unexpectedly interrupted by the famine that befell the eastern part of Romania in 1946 and ’47 as a result of drought in Moldova and the subsequent diversion of crops to the Soviet Union as war reparations, undermining the region’s ability to recuperate (Hitchins 1994:535-536). Victoria described her food consumption in this period as limited to fish from local waters, snails and occasionally milk, and she told of fighting with her siblings over kernels of corn left in the barn following the previous year’s harvest. She said “so that we would not starve to death” (*ca să nu murim de foame*) the government launched a program to send children from affected areas to live with families in other parts of the

country. She described being placed on a train that took her to a town in Oltenia, a region to the west of Bucharest, where she moved in with a peasant family for approximately one year. During her stay with them, her school attendance was again suspended, Victoria instead performing farming duties. She expressed little regret for this, however, saying that the family treated her very well.

After returning home the following year, 1948, at the age of ten Victoria began to go to elementary school. With visible dignity, she recalled being a good student, regularly arriving for class with her homework completed, conduct for which she developed a reputation, other students plying her with sugar cubes and candy so that she would complete their homework, too. Still, she noted that at times they would tease her. She finished four years of schooling but with evident disappointment said she could not continue. Regrettably, the door to further education was “closed” (*închis*) as her labor was needed to carry out a range of tasks and her family was incapable of paying a fee for schooling that at the time she said was still compulsory.

Victoria described some of the activities she was required to do. These included making rugs and tapestries for their home, a labor-intensive process that involved the following steps: her family would cultivate hemp, which she would cut down and allow to dry in order to remove the seeds for future planting by beating the stalks. She would then take the dried plant to the river where she placed it in the water, covering it with mud and large stones so that it would stay submerged for approximately two weeks, during which it would become somewhat decayed. Following this, she would remove the plant from the water, clean it thoroughly and dry it out again, after which she would place it on a beam supported by two pairs of legs (a tool called a *melițoi*) in order to break it up

with another instrument until the fibers became visible. These she combed, dyed and spun into thread for weaving on a loom after a day's work in the fields.⁴

She described making silk cocoons, which her family would give to the state for compensation and for processing into fabric. That is, Victoria said they received money for the cocoons, placing this activity outside the system of quotas peasants were required to fulfill at the time. This cocoon-making involved placing silkworms on a table that Victoria would then cover with mulberry leaves. Over time, the worms would form "eggs" (*ouă*) of silk, as she put it, that she would then gather together and send to a reeling facility.

Victoria coupled these and other activities with time devoted seasonally to cultivating corn, wheat and sunflower. She would hoe fields planted with corn (a practice that remains common among rural dwellers today), gather the ears at harvest time and store it in a barn, and she would later take it to a mill where it would be ground into corn meal for making *mămăligă*. With a sickle she would cut down the corn stalks, which were fed to their domesticated animals. Particularly backbreaking was harvesting wheat (*grâu*), because it required one to bend over for long periods of time. It was an important grain, however, because of the multiple uses to which it could be put. Victoria described feeding the animals with the straw (*pai*) taken from it and constructing the walls of houses with a mixture of straw, clay and water, an activity she would eventually carry out in order to build her own home, as shown below.⁵

⁴ I asked Victoria whether she had also woven clothing, and she responded that by that time it was no longer a common practice. The industrial manufacturing of clothing began to eliminate this practice in Romania in the late 19th century (Hitchins 1994:183-185).

⁵ I learned little from Victoria regarding the collectivization of her family's land, I suspect because the topic remained very sensitive to her and is a topic people in general are reluctant to talk about as Verdery has observed (2006). That said, she did briefly open up about it after we were well-acquainted, saying that her father had disagreed with it and was beaten by officials because of this.

Victoria engaged in these and many other activities at her parents' home until 1956, when she was 19. At that age she was married, an experience she said was "forced" (*forțat*) upon her. Her prospective in-laws, who were also peasants living in another village along the Prut River approximately twenty kilometers to the south, learned from a neighbor that she was a hard worker and in time one of Victoria's cousins took her to their home. She was placed in a room alone with her future husband Serghei, his family waiting in an adjacent hall while they spoke. Serghei then asked for her hand in marriage; given the social pressure, she felt she could not refuse despite feeling very uncertain and confused. She said she doubted whether he was the husband she wanted, telling me Serghei was too "spineless" (*moale*) for her and that she anyway had already developed feelings for another man away in the military. She said she recalled feeling they at least needed more time to become acquainted.⁶

Despite Victoria's reluctance, the two were married, and she was brought to live in her in-laws' home.⁷ She described the experience of residing there as very negative:

They were drinking, eating. He [her husband] went into the army and left me working hard for them like a slave. All day long with the animals, the birds and out in the fields. Then I would be in the kitchen, making plates of *mămăligă* the size of a cart's wheel, kneading dough for bread and cleaning huge amounts of fish. I did all of this by my little self in the heat of the fire, sweat pouring off of me, hungry from not eating, with tears in my eyes. It was too much! And when I would sit myself down at the table, they gave me nothing.

⁶ Victoria said that her experience was unusual, but studies confirm that the practice of arranging marriages was actually common in rural areas at least in the interwar period (Scurtu 2003:155). The ostensible control that she and her future husband exercised over the process by being placed together in a separate room does, however, suggest that the practice was undergoing change.

⁷ According to Victoria, it remained common in this period for parents to give a dowry to their children when they married, an observation Scurtu confirms (*ibid.*). She said sons would receive an ox and a cart and daughters would get a cow and a cart. She explained that she did not receive a dowry, however, since she was the last of several children, but the immense changes brought on by the socialist transformation of the countryside probably also figured into this experienced. She mentioned instead receiving money with which she purchased furniture, including a chair and desk in their apartment.

This experience weighed heavily on Victoria. Elaborating on it a few moments later in the same interaction, she occasionally resorted to present tense verbs, suggesting the imprint it had left on her:

I was constantly working, day and night. I received pity from no one, and no one gave me respect or anything. I had to work endlessly. I was making *mămăligă*. They would sit twenty people at the table. There were a lot of people because it was a large family and they also invited friends and neighbors. I made food for everyone, and I was a slave, serving everyone but never having the chance to eat. I would eat chicken necks and claws and would pick over what was left of the bones. I would leave and close myself up in the home and start to cry, saying to myself ‘when I was at home my mother would make me a chicken leg on the grill and I would eat it...And I wasn’t even working as hard then as I am now.’ I was crying and talking to myself, making the pillow wet with tears, saying ‘Oh, how hard it is among strangers, eating stale bread, no one showing pity or giving respect.’⁸

There was nevertheless little she could immediately do to change her situation. Returning home was not possible not only because of the “shame” (*rușine*) it would bring upon her and her family but also because she said she would likely be beaten and forced to return to her husband’s family anyway.

In order to move out of her in-laws’ residence, Victoria and her husband had to build a house, the construction of which she was largely responsible for because Serghei was occupied with military service and his career: for six years he was employed in the construction of irrigation systems in rural Moldova and for several years in a food processing facility; he later gained employment in Galați at a facility manufacturing furniture, for more than fifteen years commuting daily between their home in the countryside and the city, which involved taking a train 60 km. (36 mi.) round-trip.

⁸ Victoria’s descriptions of making *mămăligă* and eating stale bread were symbolically meaningful. Both food items are central to the diet in Moldova, no meal being served without one or the other. Her reference to making and being refused them thus indexed the value she placed on the work she performed and the extent of the exclusion she felt, respectively.

Building the house took many years, and, although it was a very difficult task, Victoria said she did it so that they could have their own place where she could eat and get up when she wanted and so that she could show others that she was not a “lazy, good-for-nothing” (*leneșă și nepăsătoare*) person:

To build the house, I carried everything on my back. It became like the neck of an ox, with wounds here [she pointed] on my shoulders. Buckets of water, straw, all like this on my shoulders. And after that I began to build the walls of the house. When I was done, I did the rest, whitewashing, painting and so on.

I asked her to further explain the process of building the house:

[I mixed] clay with straw and water. The clay and water turned out like cement. Then I would smooth it out until it was like butter... which let me stick it together. I built six rooms, plus a stable, a shed, two summer kitchens, a bread oven, a hall, a winter kitchen, and three additional rooms. I did it all with these hands and with this back.

In the meantime, she and her husband began to have children, raising three boys and one girl beginning in the early 1960s. A typical day began at five in the morning when her husband left for work and involved childcare, agricultural labor, housekeeping and home construction:

I would come home [from the fields in the early morning] and look through the window to see if the kids had gotten up.⁹ If they weren't up, I would again return to the fields and finish what I needed to do on that day. After that, I would come home, the kids would be a mess, so I would clean them and change their clothes. I'd send them outside, spread a blanket under a tree in the courtyard, and I'd feed them. After this, I'd go inside to clean up after the kids, and after this I'd stick my legs in the clay, mixing it with water using my feet. In winter the water was really cold: it would 'cut me' on the legs. From this I would make wattle.

At times, she expressed great pride in her achievements:

⁹ For a time she would also leave them at home with an older relative, her relationship with whom I discuss below.

I had created a home by the age of 35. The house was finished, and we had four children. So you see I succeeded in realizing a house and four children.

To this, she added:

The garden was like a flower. You would walk into the courtyard, and it was like walking into heaven. The flowers, the trees in blossom...We would gather cherries in May, and in the fall pears would fall to the ground and [we had] tomatoes, half of them red, half of them yellow. It was such a sight. The kids would go and pick apples from the tree...

Victoria's work involved looking after her husband's grandmother, who for a period lived in their home. She characterized their relationship as tense, the grandmother often urging her to work and discouraging her from socializing with neighbors:

She would say 'come on, come on, the sun is up, and you need to make supper for your husband' or 'come on, get going home, a good housewife doesn't stand around all day talking.' She pushed all the neighbors away from me, so I wouldn't talk to anyone and only do my work. I put up with this for quite a while, telling myself 'you don't talk back to an older person' but finally I did say to her 'you know something, there is only one person in charge of me, I have only one husband, and I know when to make his dinner. I know when to do my work. I have never disturbed your sleep, I have never upset you over anything, so please let a neighbor come over for a visit once in a while, or let me talk to them from time to time or just take it easy once in a while instead of working, working, working all the time.' But then, it was awful, she came after me with a hatchet.¹⁰

She threatened her with the hatchet but fortunately did not cause any physical harm. The incident contributed nonetheless to the generally negative psychological state Victoria experienced in this period of her life:

There was just so much work. I was hungry, tired, and down-and-out.

¹⁰ Victoria's accounts of her interactions with her husband's grandmother offer a glimpse into the status of older people during the socialist period. Her influence over Victoria suggests that the elderly held relatively greater standing then than in the post-socialist period, which likely partly stemmed from their generally higher income. The woman's power probably also resulted from the fact that she was a member of Victoria's husband's family.

More than this, when I'd come home [from the fields], I'd have so much to do with the kids. You can imagine how I'd find them at home. They were young, one was two years old, the other three. I began to receive treatment in order to keep things together because I was agitated all the time and upset over the direction my life had taken. I didn't have anyone to complain to so I kept it all inside of me and it really began to eat me up inside...So I went to the doctor, who told me I needed to calm myself down. I didn't have anyone to tell my problems to. There was no one to gripe to about all of the things that were bothering me, and since I couldn't take it anymore and was just complaining to myself, the doctor gave me pills.¹¹

She suffered not only psychologically but also physically, developing over time a number of medical conditions, including angina, problems with her gallbladder, osteoporosis, rheumatism and severe pain in her lower back and upper left thigh partly as a result of a ruptured disc in her spinal column.¹² The last of these she attributed directly to years of carrying heavy loads. She narrated her long-term experience with this problem in the following way:

I would rest a bit and take one medication after another until I could move again. Then I'd go alone to the dispensary, and they would give me an injection which would help me to feel better. So I'd go back to work again, but once more my back would stiffen up, and I was in so much pain. But there was so much to do with the children, the animals, the birds, the horses and pigs and sheep, the garden, the vineyards, the fields. And that old woman, my husband's grandmother, would put pressure on me again.

This condition grew worse when she fell on ice one winter while going to a relative's house, which left her unable to walk for approximately six months due to a displaced disc

¹¹ The fact that she went to the doctor and was prescribed medication provides insight into the rural population's greater access to medical care in the socialist period than in earlier years. After telling me about this experience, Victoria then at length recounted how two of her sons at one point consumed some of her medication while she was away, thinking it was candy. In further testament to the increased availability of health services to rural dwellers, the boys were immediately treated at a local dispensary, one of them shortly thereafter being taken by ambulance to the county hospital in Galați, where he stayed for about a week. Both survived the episode.

¹² Victoria at first orally described these health problems to me, later confirming several of them by presenting medical documents to me.

and stiffness in her left leg. Victoria eventually received care in the capital:¹³

I went to Bucharest and stayed a month in the hospital and they resolved the problem, putting me back on my feet. Yes, they got me back on my feet in a month, and then I suffered for six more months, more than you can possibly imagine. I wanted to sit at the dinner table, but I couldn't. I wanted to rest in bed, but I couldn't do that either. The only position I could stand to be in was standing with my cane. I even slept like that.

The story continued as follows:

After this, my doctor told me to go each year to *Lacul Sarat* for treatment.¹⁴ I did this and felt well for a while, but again two, three years ago I had the same problem. It was the same old story, and I began to use a wheelchair to get around. I had a good doctor who got me through that, thank God.¹⁵ But because of all this, the problem with my leg, the problem with my bones, I am always in pain, I live with pain.¹⁶

Victoria's life in the countryside came to an end in the mid-1980s when she was nearly fifty. An urban apartment with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, dining room and large balcony became available to her family in a neighborhood that until the

¹³ I do not know precisely who performed her duties during this period, but I would anticipate that her husband's family, who lived nearby, would have taken on some of her tasks.

¹⁴ *Lacul Sarat* (The Salt Lake) is a rehabilitation center specializing in the treatment of skeletal and muscular problems. Throughout the country, there are a number of such centers where a wide range of health problems are treated. Many people told me they had grown increasingly difficult to afford because of cutbacks in state subsidies.

¹⁵ Victoria's reference to God was not perfunctory. She regularly spoke of the importance to her of God and religion, and it was her custom on Sunday mornings to spend hours in prayer in her room. She also supplicated before statues in Galați's Roman Catholic church on one occasion when we visited the church together – that she was Romanian Orthodox did not seem problematic to her; in fact, many people I met held the Western Christian churches in high regard, some being certain, as noted earlier, that reunification between "Catholics" and the Orthodox was soon at hand.

¹⁶ This account of Victoria's problems with her lower back and thigh provides evidence once again of the rural population's improved access to health care services under socialism. The description is furthermore telling for its lack of reference to alternative or "natural medicine" (*medicina naturală*) in treating the problem. This does not mean that such forms of treatment were unfamiliar to Victoria; she brewed tea for a minor ailment I was experiencing at one point and both of us gathered a plant on a day we went fishing, described below, that she used as a remedy against certain health problems. Still, their omission in the narrative is meaningful since it suggests that alternative medicine held a lower priority to her than other treatments.

1970s had been open grassland and fields.¹⁷

This transition terminated Victoria's involvement in agricultural labor. She wanted however to obtain a job in the city primarily to ensure a retirement income. She explained that Serghei would not give her permission to do this:

He said no because we had four children, I was not well and he wanted to protect me. I had been operated on, so he said 'you should stay home.' The truth is, he was jealous. He couldn't stand the idea of me working in the city outside the home.

As a result of this, Victoria stayed at home caring for the household and later received "social assistance" (*ajutor social*) for her health problems, some of her treatments of which I return to later. When I asked whether she ever missed living in the countryside, she said no, remarking that living there had involved doing too much work.

"The Work Was beyond My Capacity":
Vasile Maniu's Life History

My acquaintance with Vasile Maniu began in September 2004 when we met at the recreational center. Noticing he was sitting alone, I introduced myself to him. We talked at some length and at one point he invited me to join him on a walk in the city. I accepted the offer, our meeting two days later and spending part of the afternoon strolling in the city and sitting in a park. He then invited me for a small meal in his modest apartment, which consisted of two rooms with no door separating them.¹⁸ Throughout

¹⁷ I believe this apartment was given to them by Serghei's employer. Much of my fieldwork was conducted among families living in this same neighborhood.

¹⁸ I learned he rented out one of the rooms to a young woman from his home village, who worked in a paper factory in Galați, but I do not believe they had an amorous relationship. Vasile slept in the other room, which also contained a stove and a table. There was no sink in the room, requiring him to wash dishes in the bathroom. There was neither a shower nor a tub in the bathroom, only a tap and small space available for cleaning oneself. I was struck by the somewhat disorderly and unclean nature of the apartment. It sat in the same neighborhood as Victoria's, but the initial purpose of the building was to house workers from the countryside who commuted from areas too far to allow them to return home on a

the day he casually told me fascinating stories about his past, leading me to invite him to more formally participate in the research. We met at his home on a couple of other occasions, during which he shared details in particular about his previous work experiences and he summarized Romania's broader history.

I believe Vasile agreed to participate in the research in part out of genuine interest in talking about his past. Having personally experienced tragedy and having accomplished a great deal in his life, he had much to share. I was especially impressed by the contentment and pride he expressed over his various achievements. Furthermore, he was motivated to participate out of a desire to help me learn about Romania, giving me "lessons" on the country's history and society during which he spoke slowly and encouraged me to write down word-for-word everything he said. Vasile seemed compelled to develop a friendship with me out of interest in contact with a person from the United States, a sentiment conspicuously revealed one day when with a smile he announced upon my arrival at his apartment that "the Americans are coming," (*"Vin Americanii"*). The remark referred to the support that had been anticipated in Romania from the U.S. following the Second World War. Made in jest, it also indicated that Vasile enjoyed my company and my attention during our meetings. This did not mean topics other than my research were absent from my visits. On one occasion when his boarder was home we discussed at his request whether I could help her secure employment outside the country. Unfortunately unable to do much for her, my relationship with Vasile nevertheless continued.

The process of gathering Vasile's life history could not be completed, though,

daily basis. He moved into the apartment after settling a divorce with his second wife; she kept the apartment in which they had lived together.

because he suffered a minor seizure brought on by sclerosis in November of that year, causing him to experience amnesia and mild dementia. After spending a week in the hospital following the attack, he moved into the home of one of his sons, where I visited him on one occasion, his family later inviting me to dinner. Soon thereafter he returned to his own apartment, where I returned to see him, but we never resumed formal research given his medical condition. The following life history is consequently more fragmentary than I had hoped, but I include it because of the insight it provides into the experiences of men from rural areas who over their lifetimes transitioned into heavy industrial labor.

One of seven children, Vasile Maniu was born in 1929 in a village to the north of Galați, his family owning a small amount of land, which was their primary source of income.¹⁹ He described his village as consisting predominantly of poor peasant families including his own; still, he succeeded in completing seven years of schooling. One of his strongest memories from school was the religious instruction he received; he remembered reciting the “Our Father” in class and seeing icons on the school walls.²⁰ At the age of fourteen (1943) Vasile was sent to Galați in order to learn a trade, being assigned as an apprentice to a craftsperson. This experience was short-lived. Within a year his patrons

¹⁹ Vasile did not mention whether all of his siblings survived to adulthood. It is possible that this number does not include some who died in childhood.

²⁰ Partly as a result of his exposure to religious instruction, the Orthodox Church was an important part of his life. On one occasion he emphasized the importance of “taking care of the soul” otherwise it would go to hell. He let me know that one could attend church under socialism so long as one kept quiet about it. Next to his bed lay a bible, and he told me we could never meet with me on Sundays because that was the day he went to church. The importance to him of the Orthodox religion was further demonstrated in critical remarks he made about Russians. For instance, he scornfully told me that they turned Romanian Orthodox churches into “stables.”

were disenfranchised, which required him to return to the countryside.²¹ He was too young to be drafted and managed to escape the wartime dislocations endured by Victoria.

Vasile proceeded to engage in labor in several domains simultaneously. Describing himself as a “peasant-farmer” (“*țaran-agricultor*”), he said he participated heavily in agricultural work, at one point after the collectivization of land in his village becoming the president of the local cooperative farm. In 1964, in his mid-thirties, he became employed at the local branch of the state electric company, work he ultimately gave up in order to assume various positions in the political structure of his village, including reviewer (*referent*), communal deputy (*deputat comunal*) and ultimately mayor (*primar*). He was very proud of his achievements in these years, describing his success in getting a number of public works projects completed in his position as communal deputy, even occasionally upstaging the mayor in these endeavors. They included the construction of a water and sewage system, the removal of municipal waste, and the building of two bridges and a public park. As mayor he received an award of 800 lei – equivalent at the time to two month’s salary – for several of these achievements. Vasile’s experience as a local political leader was unique to the socialist period; in the interwar years, peasants like him were unlikely to advance politically. Still, he undoubtedly had social connections that facilitated his rise to power and his completion of the impressive capital projects, but I was never able to explore these details with him because of his illness. In other words, I believe Vasile’s success in local politics came from more than just a commitment from communist leaders to place people of peasant background into positions of power even if this was consistent with government policy.

²¹ I never learned why this endeavor was terminated but hypothesize it resulted both from the economic impact of the Second World War and more generally from the longer-term industrial development of Romania, which had been undermining small-scale crafts since the late 19th century.

In this period, Vasile got married, and he and his spouse began to have children. Characteristic of rural dwellers, they had a large family relative to couples in urban areas, raising four boys and two girls. One of the boys tragically died at the age of eight from an accidental poisoning. In spite of this loss, Vasile articulated having much pride in his family, letting me know that in addition to his six children, he had fifteen grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. His relationships with at least some of these family members appeared generally positive, evident both in the care which one of his sons and his son's spouse, who lived in Galați, gave him when he became ill, and in his having spent several months prior to our first meeting with his daughters in Oradea, a city in western Romania.²²

When Vasile was in his mid-forties (1975), his work life changed significantly; he became employed in Galați as a fitter in a locomotive machine building unit at the steel manufacturing plant. He took on this work when he did not have sufficient income to maintain "home and family," as he put it, an early indication of the severe economic downturn the country was entering. During the first four to five years in this position he commuted between his village and the city, which involved daily riding a train for approximately 100 km. (60 mi.) one way. When he was 50 (in 1979), the state provided his family an apartment in the city. Despite moving to Galați, Vasile maintained ties to the countryside, which included periodically contributing labor to the rural cooperative.

Vasile remembered this period as extraordinarily demanding, saying "the work was beyond my capacity" (*munca a fost peste puterea mea*). He argued that the most difficult tasks in the factory were given to people like him who belonged to the unskilled

²² Two of his sons lived in the countryside conducting agriculture. Their precise activities and his relationship with them remained unclear to me.

peasantry. Like the policy that provided higher pensions to industrial workers than to agricultural laborers, this practice stemmed from peasants' low social status relative to workers under socialism. The work he performed was also risky; on one occasion he was nearly crushed by a 500 kg. (c. 1 ton) piece of steel that fell down within a few meters of him, an experience which still caused him to shudder. Furthermore, he said the difficulty he encountered on the job was aggravated by the mismatch between his schedule and the decrees regarding work hours. Although he had been hired to work forty hours a week, Monday through Friday, he often contributed labor beyond this limit, at times even going to the unit on weekends. He said this experience was particularly unsatisfactory given that he received no pay for work he performed on Sundays, which was defined as "patriotic labor" (*muncă patriotică*).

Vasile pointed out that working in the factory and on the cooperative at the same time was "extremely stressful" (*stres mare*)²³ and took a toll on his physical health. He partly attributed his cardiovascular disease – in 2002 he had two heart attacks – diabetes and paresis to the unremitting pressure on him to complete multiple, difficult tasks. He did not, however, perceive his experience as unique, indicating that most people of his generation and social class had been overburdened by labor demands which had influenced their health – an argument supported by the statistics on longevity presented in chapter two:

Throughout the development of the communist society, people worked a great deal. They built a lot of factories and expanded

²³ This was one of just a handful of times that a pensioner described life under socialism being "stressful." Such references to stress make sense given that many people, like Vasile, juggled myriad job and family responsibilities in that historical period. In other words, life could be stressful then, too. The difference from today is that an "epidemic of stress" has emerged as a result of the very changed circumstances since the end of socialist rule in 1989. Talk of stress is no longer incidental; it is central. And the causes of stress have changed dramatically from socialism to post-socialism.

construction overall. The peasantry left the villages for the cities to perform the most difficult work that required few skills. Because of all the work, the longevity of the population began to drop. A lot of different illnesses appeared. Heart disease, cardiovascular illnesses, diabetes, paresis, angina pectoris, untreatable illnesses, hypoglycemia, cancer and many other illnesses.

He said “fear” (*frică*), too, had been a factor in his declining health, emphasizing not only the near-fatal experience at *Sidex* but also an unbearable lack of food at one point in his life and living through the Second World War.

In spite of the rigors of his work life, Vasile appreciated the remuneration he received, pointing out that it had given workers a better life and had begun to improve the peasantry’s standard of living. This assessment was matched by implicit support he at times gave to the socialist system, as in the following thoughts he shared about the post-socialist period. I had asked him what he believed were the principal problems confronting pensioners in contemporary Romania. In response, he indirectly attributed pensioners’ condition to the transition:

Given that Romania is a poorly developed country...Not because of the people, because of the politics, because of the revolution that took place, the economy of the country has changed into a new form. A new system for running the country has come about. We’ve moved from communism to capitalism. During this time, a lot has come to an end. In agriculture, in people’s households, in the collective, so much that was, no longer is. They gave land back to people and because of this fact so much has been delayed since the revolution. Immediately after the revolution, Law 18 was written. Law 18 gave land back to former proprietors, which ended the cooperative system. And land that had formerly belonged to the state was given back to the large landowners.

Vasile’s life underwent significant change in 1989. Turning sixty that year, he officially retired from his position at *Sidex*. His wife also died that year and the revolution took place. Our limited time did not allow me to explore these experiences

with him as much as I would have liked, thus Vasile appears with much less frequency in later chapters than others who agreed to share their life with me. Despite having some complaints about the challenge of living on his pension, Vasile had a self-possessed nature flowing from his numerous successes and the family he had helped to build. In his view, belief in God had also helped to solidify his confidence.

“I Was Both the Man and the Woman”:
Raluca Barbu’s Life History

Raluca Barbu and I became acquainted shortly after my arrival to begin fieldwork. This was made possible by a number of the ceremonial events and excursions sponsored by the Pensioners’ Foundation, where Raluca was a volunteer. The first of these was a celebratory tribute to the volunteers, which was followed in subsequent months by the trip to the botanical garden, the gathering in honor of Raluca’s retirement and the three-day monastery tour. On these occasions, I was struck by her energetic personality and general openness, Raluca being a person with whom I could easily engage in conversation. She unhesitatingly joined in a formal, semi-structured interview held in a private office to which the Foundation at one point gave me access, and she shared many details about her life during a few visits I made to her home, a modestly sized apartment in a largely working-class neighborhood. During the first of these visits we were alone except for when a neighbor briefly stopped by. The second visit gave me the opportunity to meet one of her three children, who was visiting from the United Arab Emirates, and on the third I became acquainted with her husband. Raluca further suggested on two or three occasions that I come to her home village, where her 88-year-old mother lived and her family owned land. I enthusiastically accepted the offers, but

she never followed through on them because for many months she was occupied with caring for a brother suffering from liver cancer, which took his life while I was in the field. The distance between Galați and the village was significant and she may have been mildly concerned about my reaction to rural living conditions.²⁴

Despite the offer never being fulfilled, my acquaintance with Raluca was enriching – she always described her life and shared knowledge of Romanian culture and society with near non-stop fervor. While interested in teaching me about her world, my impression was that she occasionally sought me out because her children were absent from her day-to-day life, a stressor I return to in the next chapter. She did not like that they had to leave Romania for work. In spite of this and other hardships she had faced in life, as with Victoria and Vasile, I was struck by Raluca’s pride in her accomplishments and the sense she conveyed perhaps even more than the others that she was morally virtuous.

In contrast to the other pensioners whose life histories are presented here, Raluca Barbu, born in 1951, did not directly experience life in Romania before the onset of Communist Party rule. Like them, though, she was raised in a rural community, her family living in a town to the southwest of Galați where prior to collectivization they owned a sizable amount of land that they had acquired following the First World War. According to Raluca, this classified her parents and five older brothers as “*chiabur*,” a label meaning wealthy peasant who hired labor. This was a possible exaggeration given her family’s extensive participation in work on the land; Raluca even described her

²⁴ She usually qualified the invitations by saying the season was not quite right for a visit and we therefore would have to wait until the weather was more favorable. Her hesitation reminded me of attitudes among urbanities that I had encountered during my years in Bucharest. Some of my students from the city at times made derisive comments about other students who commuted to the school from the countryside. Having spent time in rural and urban areas, Raluca may have been sensitive to such attitudes.

mother laboring in the fields with Raluca as a child on her back. She noted their success at producing abundant harvests of corn, wheat and other crops thanks to the land's fertility and flatness. Predictably, collectivization ended her family's land ownership. Property in the region in which they lived was of special interest to party-state leaders because it was particularly fecund. She described her parents adamantly opposing collectivization and the violence against them that this provoked.

Despite her family's loss of land and the harsh treatment of her parents in the process, Raluca generally spoke highly of the role the socialist state had played in developing the agrarian sector, recalling the increased availability under socialism of farm machinery such as mechanized plows. She expressed appreciation for the plot of land rural households received for gardening in exchange for work they performed on the cooperative, and she noted her family's ready access to milk and meat from the domesticated animals they kept.²⁵

As was true of Victoria and in general of young women living in the countryside in that period, Raluca participated in a diverse array of household activities from an early age. She described making soap from pork fat, cleaning clothes with corn cobs and baking bread. I even gained a small glimpse into her abilities when she handily prepared several trays of fresh quince and pumpkin strudel as we conversed one day in her kitchen. She said she began in her youth to participate in agricultural labor, including entering the fields to hoe crops. Although she recalled such work as arduous, more than this she was

²⁵ The reasons for Raluca's general lack of criticism of the socialist state require some unpacking. It at least partly stemmed from the array of benefits she and her family gained under socialism, which may have offset the impact of the tremendous loss of land they experienced. Her attitude also appears to reflect the triumph of ideological maneuvers by the state, as manifested below in Raluca's reference to the "cult of work." Present-day conditions shaped her opinions about life under socialism as well, a concern she expressed about "depravity" in contemporary Romania, which I return to below, likely influencing how she portrayed the past. Moreover, it is possible she felt uneasy about expressing criticism toward the socialist government given the Social Democratic Party's hold on power in Galați.

proud of the skills it had given her. On several occasions she boasted about being able to live without the “conveniences of modern life,” telling me she could manage comfortably in their absence.

Unlike Victoria, Raluca did not remain in the countryside. Instead, she was sent to live in the county capital Brăila in order to attend elementary and secondary school. Once she graduated from school (in the late 1960s), she moved to Galați, approximately 100 km. (60 mi.) from her home village, where she was accepted into a technical training school (*școală tehnică*) – all these experiences were made possible by the economic expansion of the period, the availability of free education and the changes in attitudes regarding the roles women should play in the economy.

Still, she remembered her time as a student as difficult because she lived on a tight budget, her limited funds paying for a room in a private home and being used to purchase goods such as chocolate or coffee to “take care of some matter” (*“ca să-mi resolv o problemă”*), that is, to pay someone for a service they rendered, an example of the “bribery” that was common in this historical period. As a result, she said she often ate only once per day and rarely used public transportation. Memories of this period of her life were nevertheless uplifting for many reasons, including that she became heavily involved in handball and volleyball, joining teams that participated in competitions throughout the Soviet bloc. And she became acquainted with her future husband during these years.

Raluca’s education led to a 32-year career in the textile industry in a mill that spun cotton into thread. During the course of her career, she received several promotions within her unit, which in due course led to her having responsibility over approximately

350 workers. As she matured in her position she began to carry out inspections of textile mills in other parts of the country.

She described her work in textiles as challenging for a number of reasons:

[A textile mill is] a place where there are noxious things like dust, lint, loud noise. For example, since I was the chief of my unit, I handled the lubricants. These included gasoline, diluents, alcohol, and so on. These were used to oil the cylinders so that the threads could be made. This was difficult work and for this reason I was placed in the second 'work group'... [I was also placed in this group because I worked] the nightshift since that was what we women did. Can you imagine being a woman and constantly working the night shift?

Raluca married in the early seventies. The state provided her and her husband an apartment in 1974, and they began to have children, raising two girls and one boy. Most household duties fell on her shoulders because her husband, a construction worker, was usually working at some distance from city:

I raised the children alone... My husband was often away at a construction site, coming home once every three months. You can imagine what this meant. I was both the man and the woman because I was usually alone. It was really difficult. What could he do for me since he would stay for only two days when he did come home. I took care of the children and everything else.

She later continued:

He would be in another part of the country. During the communist period, there were construction sites, and wherever they were, that was where you had to go. That was how construction was carried out. He worked on construction sites, in turbines, hydroelectric plants, thermoelectric power stations.

Raluca articulated feeling morally and socially obligated to properly execute her role as a mother, a duty she said she had fulfilled. This meant looking after her children, giving them proper advice and providing for them materially, which was made possible by her and her husband's steady employment:

I took care of them [their children]. For me the most important thing is family, children. That is how it is. You can even be unhappy in your marriage, but if you have children, you have to stay with them and raise them. You can't abandon them. So as it was, I felt I was indebted to God. Just as my parents raised me and did not abandon me, that is what I did when it was my turn. And I inspired my children to do the same. [I told them]: 'Pay attention to me: when you get married, you must take care of the person you chose. I'm not telling you not to get married, just be sure that the person isn't a psychopath or a person who is possessive. You should be able to understand each other because there is a lot that comes out of understanding and open discussion. Be a good housekeeper. Look after your children properly. Don't abandon them because, most importantly, if a parent abandons children, they suffer...' So, you see, I worked to be sure that I did not produce children who would be a cost to society, or to be rejects or to be a burden because later on, when they grew older, I knew that society would condemn me if this had happened, saying that I did not know how to educate and to raise my children. Have you seen people who are thieves, vagabonds? Society condemns the mother for them, saying that she did not know how to educate them and to show them the right way in life. So...I did my duty before God and before society. I had children, so I had to ensure their existence. Not to give them luxuries but to give them what was necessary, that is, that they had food to eat, clothing to wear, books and school supplies.²⁶

Raluca felt responsible for inculcating the 'cult of work' (*cultul muncii*) in her children, which she believed she accomplished by making them participate in farming activities she engaged in intermittently as an adult:

I worked with them. I went with them, and we worked together. I would say to them: 'we must go to the fields to hoe so that we will have food to eat. We must hoe the corn and the other crops. We must work. If we don't work, we won't have anything.' I raised them in the 'cult of work.' I didn't coddle them saying 'Oh, I see your little hands are hurting you.' Absolutely not! [I

²⁶ Raluca's references to God mirror the importance of religion to her, which she spoke about on other occasions too. I further observed her interest in the subject when we visited the monasteries in northeastern Romania. At one point I asked her whether she had an opinion about why it was common for people in the West to believe that religious practice had been absent from people's lives in socialist Eastern Europe. She responded that it was the case that if one were a member of the Communist Party one would encounter problems if one went to church. Given that she had not in that position, she said she had had a rich spiritual life including church attendance from a young age.

said] ‘everyone must get to work: we all work, we all eat, we all live.’

Raluca expressed appreciation for many of the benefits the socialist regime had brought her family, noting that “during Ceaușescu’s rule they gave us a house...[and] education was free,” but she emphasized as well the negative psychological and physical impact of the work she had performed. For example, she described – and note that she was 53 at the time – suffering from serious heart problems, a thyroid condition, rheumatism and osteoporosis, the physical signs of which were obvious. She attributed these to “difficulties” (“*greutăți*”) “anxiety” (“*din cauza...emoțiilor*”) and being “upset” (“*din cauza supărărilor*”) from the challenges under socialism of raising children more or less on her own and working outside the home.²⁷

In spite of these medical concerns and other problems she faced, Raluca said she did not cry out “oh, woe is me, what am I going to do,” when she was in a difficult situation. She considered herself hardworking, capable and uncomplaining, an attitude which persisted into the present. Raluca continues to work long hours in her retirement as shown in chapter five.

“We Were Said To Be Sacrificing Ourselves for Our Children”: Adrian Tomescu’s Life History

Adrian Tomescu is the only person whose life history I present whom I did not meet directly at the Pensioners’ Foundation. Not long before I entered the field, Adrian’s wife Felicia wrote a letter to the editors of a local newspaper in which she described that they were living in social isolation because they had no family or friends in Galați; they

²⁷ Although she did not confirm this, I suspect that she periodically received support from her mother in looking after their children.

had moved to the city from Dobrogea, to the east, following Adrian's retirement in the mid-nineties. The director of the Foundation read the letter, which provoked her to ask an assistant, Constanța Iorga, to visit the couple. After I became acquainted with Constanța, she introduced me to the Tomescus. I then became a regular visitor to their home.

The life history is based on numerous formal and informal interactions with Adrian throughout my research. Nearly every conversation between us took place in the Tomescus' tidy, two-room apartment, the three of us usually sitting together in the living room or at times Adrian and I sitting there alone because Felicia was in the kitchen preparing a meal or coffee. Adrian was a thoughtful interlocutor, always answering my questions very carefully. There was little that interrupted us although he and Felicia would occasionally spar fairly congenially over various matters.

Among the four life histories presented here, Adrian's is perhaps the most overtly political, our interactions offering him the opportunity to engage in a critique of the times through which he had lived. Thus, even more than in others' histories, descriptions he gave of personal experiences often blended with analyses of their social and political contexts. In these discussions he was relentlessly critical of the regimes that had been the backdrop to his life, save innocent childhood memories he shared of the interwar period. Although he appreciated some of the conditions under socialism – in particular the job security and the adequate pension benefits, both of which he contrasted with the conditions in the post-socialist era – he was very unforgiving of the leaders and various other features of both historical periods.

I believe Adrian's reasons for evaluating the recent and socialist past in a

generally disapproving manner reflected the socioeconomic condition in which he lived as a pensioner. Adrian regularly expressed disappointment in the state for failing to provide more to the retired, especially given all the work to which they had devoted their lives. He had a pronounced desire to travel abroad at least once in his life but knew he probably would never be able to do this. Instead of traveling or engaging in other recreational activities, he filled much of his time reading books from the public library. Another potential reason for Adrian's negative interpretation of the past was his personal life. He and Felicia were unhappy in their relationship, perhaps in part because of their estrangement from their only child, a son who remained in the city they had left. In addition to these probable causes for Adrian's cynicism, much of his attitude plausibly stemmed from many of his experiences – that is, I do not think present discontent alone colored the narratives of past experiences he shared with me.

Adrian's general motivation for confiding in me was comparatively straightforward. Given his and Felicia's lack of social connections in Galați, our meetings afforded him and his wife the opportunity to converse. As a result, we would spend long evenings together talking, drinking black coffee I usually brought with me as a gift and playing with their cat.²⁸

Born in 1933, Adrian Tomescu grew up in a town northwest of Galați. His family owned between four and five hectares (ten and 12.5 acres) of land which was cultivated primarily by his mother and an older brother and which provided subsistence to their household. Like the majority of people in Adrian's town, his grandfather, parents and several of his seven siblings were employed in the local petroleum industry, his father,

²⁸ Even the toys we used to play with the cat were an insight into the standard of living of pensioners in Romania. Instead of buying them from the market, Adrian made a number of playthings from scraps of material they had around the home or others had thrown out.

for example, being a welder. Adrian's opinion of work in this sector was positive; partial foreign ownership of the industry prior to socialism (oil production being one of the industries in which outside experts continued to play a role, as noted in chapter two) had resulted in relatively favorable conditions for employees.

Adrian attended school from approximately 1940 to 1948, during which the Second World War and the regional drought and famine took place. He shared few memories of the former, but spoke extensively about the latter, which he remembered lasting two years:

From 1945 to 1947 we had a drought. It didn't take place in all counties. It was in Dobrogea, Moldova... Where there was no drought, the harvest occurred. In Banat, in Oltenia it rained. In the rest of the country the ground dried up because...it didn't rain and it was very hot...If you walked in the fields, you could see huge gaps in the earth. If you weren't careful, you could break a leg in one of them. The earth cracked open because of the drought and there was no harvest, and grass that had grown was burned by the sun. The peasants no longer had food to give to their cows. They didn't even have food for themselves. So then many people began to sell all that they had in their homes and went to Banat in order to buy a sack of corn meal...Others who had money began to buy land because many people who were poor reached the point of selling even the land they worked.²⁹

Adrian's third-person rendering of the drought was supplemented by more personal insights some months later, including the impact it had had on his family's ability to feed their domesticated animals. The greater candor of his account no doubt reflected our closer relationship at that point:

I remember that we had two cows, but we didn't have the means to feed them during the winter. So before winter came we went to the forest...in the Carpathian mountains near the town where we lived. We went there and we gathered...oak leaves, and we put them into sacks and tied the sacks up. This was for winter for the cows.

²⁹ I have cut out some of Adrian's repetition here. Although mildly tiresome, his repetitiveness in discussing the drought suggests its importance to his family and village.

We did not have anything else to feed them.³⁰

He further described the proliferation of bartering in this period and a decision his father made to sell land:

People would get 100 kilograms of wheat in exchange for a carpet that probably should have cost more like 500 kilograms or more. In order to eat, people were giving away everything: clothes, jewelry of course, everything so that they could live...People were selling land. For example, I remember that my father sold land then. We had a small piece of land on which...I was a kid and we had planted grape vines on it. Two years or maybe three years had passed since then and it was time for the vines to produce grapes. I remember that he ended up selling that land for a worthless price.³¹

Shortly after the drought, the impact of the Communist Party's rise to power began to be felt in rural households, a process Adrian described in the following way – an account which gives life to the discussion in the previous chapter about peasants' experiences in the immediate postwar period:

In the beginning, the communists did not take the peasants' land, but they placed several taxes on them. It was worse than when the Turks controlled the country. People would come from city hall and they would count everything in the courtyard, including the hens. [They would ask] 'How many hens do you have? Ten? Good then, since you have ten hens you will give one hundred eggs each year as a tax to the state.'...Just like that, to the state without any payment in return. Following this, they'd ask 'How many cows do you have?... Ok, then give us so much milk.' What they were doing was setting a quota, a number of liters of milk that you had to give to the state. You presented milk at city hall or some other center where a large quantity of milk was accumulated...If you had pigs, you had to give one to the state and they would pay you whatever they wanted for it, which usually was a small amount of money, really nearly nothing. Let's say just as an example that a kilogram of meat cost 50,000 lei, the state would pay you 50 lei.³²

³⁰ Aside from this and most likely a few other activities he never disclosed, Adrian said he had performed little agricultural labor in his lifetime.

³¹ The drought contributed to the greater impoverishment of this already relatively poorly developed region of Romania. The present-day, negative stigma toward Moldova (including, e.g., the Moldovan accent) by people in other regions of the country arguably results partly from this history.

Meanwhile, the war reparations to the Soviet Union were negatively influencing the quality of life. Adrian recalled people furtively cursing Russia for extracting gold, uranium, petrol, timber, wheat and corn from the country, but he said that no one spoke openly about the matter and in any event there was nothing one could do to change it. He said that instead the population just lived with the severe rationing, such as the per person, per month allotment of one-half liter of sunflower oil.

As these processes were unfolding, Adrian finished his schooling and began working in the petroleum industry, an experience he said he did not like. It lasted only a few years, however, because he was conscripted into the military in the year 1953 at the age of 20. He spent three years as a sailor, a period he remembered fondly, reminiscing about gaining weight and being well-rested given that his company ate well and slept long hours on their vessel, awaking most mornings to the call of a donkey on shore. Although they were required to carry out drills including shooting firearms, the only onerous work Adrian recalled was collecting beets and picking cotton on the Bărăgan Steppe south of Galați during the annual harvest, the military's assistance being required in this domain because large numbers of agricultural workers had been drawn into industry.

After his years in the military, Adrian did not return to his village. Instead he moved to Galați, where he spent three years (1956 to 1959) in training as a plumber. Posing a question that reflected our vastly different backgrounds, I asked Adrian why he had decided to take up this occupation. He replied that it was not his choice. "You were assigned" (*repartizat*) he said, to be trained and to work in a domain in which the state

³² This example is based on current prices and is exaggerated. At one point he even said that people generally received a quarter of the value of a pig.

had determined it needed skilled hands; a person was not even able to choose the location of employment. As a result, after a short period of working in Galați, he was sent to Tulcea to work as a plumber. He met Felicia in that city, the two married and together had one son.³³

Adrian expressed criticism of the work schedule he was obligated to follow:

You were required to work six days a week, following the same schedule on Saturdays as on the other days of the week, and on some Sundays you were obligated to do voluntary work.

He found the “voluntary work” aggravating and tiresome:

Each Sunday you had to present yourself at your regular workplace, and from there you were sent to harvest corn, for example, or to do other agricultural labor...or you were sent to the park to remove weeds around rose bushes. In winter we cleared snow off the roads and did other activities like this. They would say ‘this is voluntary.’ That is, we were told we did it for pleasure and out of our own good will, but if you did not participate, you were penalized. Part of your salary was taken from you.³⁴

“So what you are saying is that in fact this wasn’t voluntary work,” I said.

No, you were obligated...voluntarily obligated. If you didn’t participate they would take five, ten percent of your salary, whatever amount your boss wanted. I ask myself, was this really voluntary? Obligatorily voluntary for sure!

He continued with other examples of his experiences with such work:

I remember that once they took us to collect corn. It was a Sunday. It was snowing and they said that the harvest had not been carried out to its end...We gathered corn into sacks, about 100 to 200 people, collecting about 100 kilograms of corn. You were shivering out there in the fields from the cold, from six-seven in the morning until three in the afternoon.

³³ Although I have not recounted Felicia’s life history here, she too was an important informant. With the exception of working for a short period in a factory processing wool, she held little employment outside the home as a result of contracting poliomyelitis as a child in the 1940s, which required her to undergo surgery on several occasions and left her with permanent disability.

³⁴ Adrian did not complain about such work violating religious precepts against working on Sundays. Unlike most people I met in Galați, he was very dismissive of religion and church authorities.

He then added:

There were even students from school doing this. They would sometimes get wet in the rain and become ill... Schoolchildren were taken out to collect corn, tomatoes. They were taken to the CAPs in order to collect carrots and other crops in the fields.³⁵

Adrian described the variety of ideological and pragmatic maneuvers employed by the state to secure the population's compliance with this work regime. He recalled Ceaușescu regularly exhorting one of them as follows: “‘you may not live well today, but under communism, you will have a good life.’” Adrian said he did not consent to this line of reasoning:

Though what was this all about? Not even the Russians managed to live well under communism and no other country in the communist work-camp either. It was exactly like this: a bunch of illusions, just like a mirage in the desert...That's how it was under communism. And there was something else they would say to us: ‘we are not working for ourselves! We are sacrificing ourselves for our children and those children will do the same for their children!’... That is what they would say when in fact there was nothing behind it.

Adrian indicated that the socialist party-state maintained this system also by guaranteeing employment and setting salaries at low, “fixed” rates. The condition of full employment under socialism was habitually contrasted with the existence of unemployment in western economies:

Ceaușescu would point out that in the U.S. there were unemployed people while here there were none. It's true that there were no unemployed people. Why? Because all people were brought together in a group,³⁶ the state managed the budget, everyone was working for the state, and work was not paid at its true value. The situation was set in such a way that you would have food to eat

³⁵ Schools called this “practical work” (*muncă practică*). As was true of soldiers, students were regularly involved in agricultural tasks during periods such as harvest-time when labor demands exceeded the number of people available to perform such work.

³⁶ Some informants described the loss of this generalized equality – of everyone's being “in the same pot,” as some put it – as yet another of the negative consequences of economic change in the post-socialist period. Discussion of people's concern about inequality returns below.

today but tomorrow you had no more so that you had to go to work the following day in order to eat. They would say that if you received more money, maybe you would not come back to work the following day. [In addition] if you missed a day of work without announcing you would³⁷ or without being ill, you were penalized with about half of your salary. This because you missed a day of work.

Although often derisively noting the role the secret police played in perpetuating this arrangement, about which he said one could not speak publicly, Adrian did express appreciation for the secure employment the socialist regime made available to the population:

During the Ceaușescu regime you knew when a new day arrived that your place of employment was secured. Nobody would throw you out of there. After a month of work...Well, it's true people were not paid as they should have been paid...Still, you knew that over a month you would receive on the fifteenth your fortnightly wage. Then on the first of each month you would receive the remainder of your salary, and this system was set up so that you would have a salary that would allow you to live. This didn't let you have luxury goods, but you could at least obtain basic goods with this salary.

He also applauded the socialist regime's commitment to improving the standard of living of the retired, noting the greater similarity between pensions and salaries in that era than in the post-socialist period, stating accurately that they were roughly 80 percent of the average wage then in comparison to 30 percent in the present day. More than this, he recalled the regular access pensioners had to health spas under socialism in contrast to today.

Adrian's memories of the subsequent decline in the socialist system largely centered on the loss during the 1980s of the basic guarantee of access to low-cost food:

³⁷ In recognizing the possibility of announcing that one would be absent from work, Adrian was referring to the common practice mentioned in chapter two of employees legitimately not attending their formal occupations in order to carry out activities of other sorts.

I'm telling you, you couldn't find food. Only when Ceaușescu would come on a visit would they put food like cheese, meat and salami onto the shelves.³⁸ ...But they still weren't selling the food to the people. As soon as he would leave, they would pull everything off the shelves and put it back into the storeroom. The poor masses stood in line for bones that they had taken the meat from. For these you would stand in line for two to three hours until it was your turn to buy one to two kilograms of bones... Bones without meat. From them you would make a soup, or whatever you would call what you could make from bones. All the other food was sent off for export. We exported to I don't know how many countries. All goods went out of the country. It was very difficult.³⁹

In later discussions on this matter he gave more examples of rationing, telling me that many food items had to be purchased with a card. He described people standing in line at midnight to buy salami the following morning and butter being sold in 100 gram (3.5 ounce) portions. This condition grew “worse and worse over time,” he concluded.

Adrian retired from his career as a plumber in the mid-nineties, and he and Felicia moved to Galați that same year. They said they made the move because households were not directly supplied natural gas in their hometown, requiring one to purchase large canisters of gasoline every month – a cumbersome task that took a great deal of time and energy. I remember finding this explanation inadequate, believing that many other factors must have contributed to their decision to leave. Central to these, I thought, might have been their ruptured relationship with their son, but I avoided broaching the topic despite all of the time spent in their home because of concern that it might instigate conflict between Adrian and Felicia. I had learned from Constanța Iorga, not from them, that they no longer had contact with him.

³⁸ At one point, Adrian and Felicia debated whether Ceaușescu knew that the population lacked adequate access to food. Characteristically, Adrian said he believed he was completely aware of the crisis; Felicia said he probably was not.

³⁹ At this point he acknowledged regional variation in the impact of food rationing. He referred specifically to the case of Sibiu (a city in Transylvania), where Ceaușescu's son Nicu was the First Secretary. He said the people in Sibiu lived better because he gave them access to food.

“I Was 180 Degrees Different Then”:
Constanța Iorga’s Experiences

My acquaintanceship with Constanța Iorga began very soon after my arrival in Galați. As mentioned above, she facilitated my introduction to some people only indirectly affiliated with the Foundation. Over the many months I spent in Galați, we developed a fairly close friendship. I met most of her immediate kin, on several occasions had meals at her home together with her parents, and we would get together in the city from time to time. Through these experiences I learned much about the life of a young woman in post-socialist Galați.

Constanța Iorga was in her early twenties at the time of the 1989 revolution. She was enrolled in a program at the University of Galați, ultimately completing a degree equivalent to a Bachelor’s of Science that involved study of several years, during which she resided with her parents. While occasionally showing pride in her university training, more often she ridiculed the experience for failing to lead to stable employment. After she completed the program, she found poorly-compensated work as an assistant in a science lab at one of the local high schools, later teaching there for a while – neither a job she liked.

In the late 1990s, Constanța accepted a position as a supermarket attendant, hoping that it would provide her with greater financial stability. She recalled that the experience, which went on for four years, transformed her into an unkind, angry and distant person – “I was 180 degrees different then,” she said – because of the poor wages she earned and the tiresome schedule she had to keep. She was required to work from eight to eight every day except Sunday, when she worked five hours once every two weeks. I asked whether she had any union representation in the job, and she responded

that she did not. As is true of most retail employment in Romania, there was little possibility to form a union; any labor activity would have been risky, she said, because it could have caused her to lose her job. Her wariness was probably warranted given that her employment in the supermarket coincided with the second major economic recession following the revolution (beginning in 1997). That recession and competition from other grocery stores in the city in any event resulted in Constanța losing her position when the supermarket went bankrupt.

She remained unemployed for approximately a year, during which a long-term relationship with a man, with whom she had no children, ended, causing her to return to her parents' apartment after some years living with him. She said she felt she had wasted her time with him. In addition to residing with her parents, who described comfortably paying off their mortgage on their small apartment in the 1970s, Constanța also relied on their pensions, which was somewhat manageable given that they had relatively high income from careers in the state bureaucracy and industrial management, reflections of the Iorgas' actual position in the upper echelons of the working-class, a point I return to below. Eventually she found work at the Pensioners' Foundation as an assistant to a small team of social workers, but the position was based on limited funding, putting her back on the job market after only a few months. She interviewed for work at two other nongovernmental organizations, which led to brief, low-paid employment in one of them.⁴⁰ Soon thereafter she interviewed for and received a position in a state institution,

⁴⁰ One could speculate about the alternate routes to employment an unmarried woman in her thirties such as Constanța would have traveled were her family unable or unwilling to provide her room and board in this period. She very likely would have left the country for work, probably finding temporary employment in domestic service or agriculture.

which she holds to the present day.⁴¹ Although at times expressing displeasure with the job because it does not involve the kind of work she would like to be doing, it appears she does now have greater employment and financial security. In spite of this, the position does not correspond to her educational qualifications – a characteristic of all her work in the post-socialist era. Under socialism, a university graduate with a science degree like Constanța would most likely have been placed in higher-level positions.

Constanța continued to reside with her parents after she began this state position. Even if she had wanted to move out, she would not have been able to afford another place. Instead, she remained at home and looked after her ill parents, from time to time receiving support for this from a sibling. This obligation took substantial time and energy; Constanța monthly obtained prescriptions from their family doctor and filled them, shopped, cooked and cleaned. At one point, her father and mother were hospitalized simultaneously, which required her and her brother to make and bring meals to them and to finesse the psychological drama of keeping word from each of them about the other's condition in order not to upset them. Her father died shortly thereafter. Constanța played a large role in managing the funerary arrangements and the *pomeni*, an experience she has very recently gone through again with her mother's passing. Aside from minor assistance kin have contributed, Constanța has borne the responsibility of care-giving single-handedly, there being no form of home care available to aid her and if

⁴¹ Constanța's reaction to the interview for this position provided insight into her sense of how limited employment opportunities had become. She said there was no chance she would receive the job because positions with the state were distributed to people whom employers knew. Furthermore, she mentioned having some sort of minor disagreement with one of the interviewers, which she was sure had ruined her chances. While it is certainly possible she said she would not get the position in order to not stoke anticipation or to justify a possible rejection, I perceived she genuinely felt she would not be offered the job.

it existed, its cost in any event would have probably been prohibitive.⁴²

In the meantime, Constanța began pursuing an academic degree at a private institution. She has often spoken reproachfully about the experience, telling me there is little she is learning despite paying substantial sums of money, an attitude toward private university training one commonly finds among people in Romania. She does not seem to anticipate a career change occurring after she completes the degree.

“I Barely Have Money for Bread”:
Costică Roman’s Experiences

I met Costică Roman in summer 2004 when he visited the Pensioners’ Foundation to pick up a food packet for his mother. Learning that I was doing a research project about pensioners, he approached me and enthusiastically invited me to come to his home to meet his mother, who lived on a survivor’s pension. I accepted the offer, which allowed me to get to know part of his family and to carry out research with his mother. I also developed an acquaintanceship with Costică who upon my visits typically invited me to an immensely cluttered room, where we would talk and watch television while his young daughter would sit at a computer playing games. We would periodically meet for beer in local bars and together participated in a few other events, including his daughter’s elementary school graduation.⁴³

Born in 1963, Costică Roman began working in the port city of Constanța in 1984

⁴² I believe she is proud of her accomplishments vis-à-vis her parents, feeling she has filled her moral duty toward them. This has come with some material remuneration, Constanța receiving the apartment in which they lived because her brother, with whom she has a good relationship, already owns an apartment.

⁴³ Costică’s daughter was not biologically related to him, and his mother in reality was his biological grandmother. His former wife had left Costică and her daughter, whose father was from a previous relationship, in order to pursue work abroad. He had not heard from her since. Although Costică’s parents were living separately in Galați, he called his grandmother his mother because she had taken on the responsibility of raising him while his parents had worked outside the home. As an adult he continued to live in her apartment, which they rented.

following completion of twelve years of schooling and several years of military training as a sailor. At the time of our meeting, he held the same position he had begun twenty years earlier, which involved directing ships bearing merchandise into dock. He performed this work fifteen consecutive days per month, remaining in Constanța throughout each of these periods. Describing his duties as stressful because they were very dangerous, at one point he told me he worried about suffering a heart attack, which unfortunately turned out to be a rather portentous comment, as I show below. He said that he would often go days with little sleep because of the demands of the job. The emotional and physical strain was exacerbated by a lack of job security in the now privatized industry in which he worked. Costică said he had no union representation and feared the possibility of losing his position, which would put him onto a tight job market in his early forties. At that age he questioned whether anyone would hire him.⁴⁴

He earned four million lei (approximately \$125) per month, an amount inadequate for meeting his needs. Not only did he have to provide support to his daughter and help cover household expenses, but he also had miscellaneous expenditures that consumed his salary. A few months after I met him, for example, he paid approximately one-quarter of his monthly income for gratuities necessary to pass an annual physical examination required by his supervisors. In order to take his daughter to an annual event honoring the city on the same day he paid this gratuity, he borrowed 20,000 lei (about \$0.65) from his mother. He used the money to purchase a few trinkets, including one of the Virgin Mary and Jesus that he gave to me, which I reciprocated by buying a small gift for his daughter. Approximately six months later he very agitatedly announced one day “I barely have

⁴⁴ Age discrimination is endemic to the Romanian labor market, position announcements often stipulating an age limit for possible candidates. Costică was correct in being concerned because in many fields forty years of age was considered too old.

money for bread” because of the expense involved in paying for compulsory on-the-job retraining courses. As was true with Victoria Dobre, his reference to bread added symbolic weight to the comment. I did not believe the amount of money he said the courses would cost was accurate; at about \$430 it seemed exorbitantly high to me, but I did not know whether he was ill-informed or had some other motivation for inflating the price, such as ensuring my sympathy. His distraughtness was nonetheless very palpable, in fact quite painful to observe. When we met in a café nearly a week after he first told me he “barely had money for bread,” he repeated the comment. To my surprise, on this occasion his eyes welled up with tears and he began to cry, cursing the government for his predicament. In addition to these indications of his financial circumstances, his co-residency with other family members (an aunt, I believe, lived in the kitchen) pointed to, as with Constanța, his precarious economic position.

Costică suffered from a number of medical conditions, including a severe gastric ulcer, for which he said doctors had recommended surgery. Given that he could not afford it and was also too fearful of the outcome, he had to forgo the procedure, treating himself with pharmaceuticals he could purchase with his salary. Later in the year, 2005, at the age of forty-one he experienced an angina attack.⁴⁵

Costică’s work had additional negative psychological influences upon him. When at one point I asked him how he had experienced turning forty less than a year earlier, he said that it was an important moment for him, causing him to reflect on his life. He concluded that he had done little of value, citing his insecure and unhealthy work situation as testament. The only experience he said he was proud of was raising his

⁴⁵ I did not learn about this directly from him. I had already left the field when it occurred, a mutual friend informing me about the incident.

daughter, his emotional attachment to her being evident on many occasions, especially at her elementary school graduation. Sitting near Costică through most of the event, I observed him trembling at one point, tears streaming down his face as his daughter was given an award.

During the short visit I made to Galați in 2006, I had little opportunity to see Costică. He was away at work during much of my stay, and on the day that we arranged to meet, once he got back to Galați, a crisis involving a friend of his (the same one who told me about the angina attack) interrupted our plans. Thus I was able to learn only generally that he was considering leaving the country for work abroad. Several months later I was told by the same mutual friend that he had indeed left the country. But not long thereafter he returned, complaining about the failure of employers abroad to pay him for his labor – and he was looking for work in Galați.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the life histories of four working-class pensioners in Galați, and it has juxtaposed these histories with some details about the lives of two younger people. There is a great deal to take from these stories about these people's lives. In some ways they show that their experiences – and certainly their personalities – are unique, or at least not generally shared by most other people. At the same time, we learn that their lives have followed patterns that are widely shared. These patterns are made clear particularly by this chapter's comparison of people who spent most of their lives under socialism with people who have lived through the post-1989 transformation as young men and women – and they will be made even clearer in subsequent chapters as

I explore the contemporary lives of today's pensioners.

Before summarizing the key similarities among the pensioners, a few more words about the differences among the people presented in this chapter are first necessary.

Although I categorize the older men and women as members of the working class, there are many indicators that each person is situated at least somewhat differently within that class. The contrasts between Victoria and Raluca, for example, are very striking:

Victoria received relatively little education – evident in difficulty she has writing – and worked mostly at home and in agriculture as a result of her relatively poor background.

Raluca earned post-secondary technical training and was promoted to a high level in industry, an experience that was partially linked to the relatively well-to-do family from which she came and to her confident personality. The point to take from this is that, as in other cultural contexts, the working class in Romania, like the small, emergent middle class and the class of newly rich, is not a homogeneous group whose membership is static, characteristics that all too often are casually ascribed to social classes. On the contrary, it includes much variation and over time, particularly in this period, it undergoes dramatic change.

The similarities among the pensioners, and their shared differences vis-à-vis members of the younger generation, are an even more important point to take from this chapter. We have seen here the work experiences of men and women under socialism – Vasile's juggling hard labor in industry with work on the collective in his home village; Victoria's looking after four children and her husband's grandmother while building a home and working in the fields and gardens; Raluca's spending nights in a textile factory and caring for a family during the day and Adrian's combining his regular duties as a

plumber with the requirement to do volunteer work. All of these experiences share a level of intensity befitting a historical period when the Romanian state pressed its people to build socialism. At the same time, these histories meanwhile all reflect the socialist state's commitment, even if ultimately to serve the party elite, to provide stable employment with salaries meeting a decent standard of living for working class people. Furthermore, we learn in these histories about people's greatly improved access to education, housing, healthcare services and other benefits under socialism in comparison to the interwar period. We observed Adrian gain training to become a plumber and placed in a city to practice this occupation, thereby leaving rural life entirely, and we also heard him praise the socialist regime – rare for him – because of the pensions and access to spa treatments it gave the retired. We saw Raluca's life transform from living in a village and working the land to receiving vocational training and becoming the head of a local industry, as well as being offered housing. We witnessed Vasile express satisfaction with the vast improvement in the standard of living as the country developed under socialism even as people also grew ill from overwork. We watched Victoria take advantage of the improved access to healthcare services. And her family, as we know, obtained housing in Galați once it became available. All of this – the job security, reliable salaries, stable prices, access to education, housing, healthcare and other benefits – has largely eroded in the post-socialist period, as evidenced by Costică's inability to pay for basic necessities with his salary and his loss of employment, and by Constanța's periods of unemployment, lack of benefits and low income.

Important, too, in this chapter are the similarities among working-class pensioners in their attitudes toward themselves, and the differences between these attitudes and the

sentiments younger people express about themselves. I was repeatedly struck during my fieldwork, not only in my encounters with the four pensioners profiled here but also in those with most other older men and women, with the pride and self-possession with which people carried themselves. As I describe below, I rarely encountered any talk about shame among pensioners, and they were very quick in most cases to explain their poverty in the post-socialist era in terms of “social causes” and “corrupt politicians and business people.” The younger working-class people I met meanwhile seemed filled with uncertainty and disappointment even if many of them, like their elders, were well-aware of the social contexts of their marginality.

The chapter appropriately ends with Costică’s departure for work abroad, and then his return to search for a job within a very unwelcoming environment. Both experiences mark major changes from the socialist period. While in that period people could generally expect their kin and community networks to remain stable over time – even as a sizable portion of the population did move from rural to urban areas – in the post-socialist era these have been torn by the departure of many people to other parts of the country or abroad. While under socialism work was certain, since the revolution it is insecurity that has characterized the labor market.

But there is yet another reason that ending this chapter with Costică’s departure is appropriate: it prepares us for the next chapter, which explores the stressors pensioners face in the post-socialist era. One of these, as will be seen in Raluca Barbu’s life, is the very fracturing of social ties, with so many young people, like Costică, departing for work abroad.

Chapter Four

“The Wind Is Blowing in My Refrigerator”: Principal Stressors in the Lives of Pensioners in Galați

Introduction

On a visit to the recreational center at the Foundation several weeks after beginning fieldwork, Rodica Dragomir, a woman in her seventies with whom I was casually acquainted, approached me and asked if I would step into the center lobby so that she could share something with me in relative privacy. I agreed, we left the center and she proceeded to tell me that one of her sons had just been hospitalized in a coma as a result of complications from a hepatitis infection. Expressing fear she might lose him, the oldest of three children at 49 years, and concern about the cost of his treatment, she began to cry. Feeling uncertain about how best to respond, I simply offered sympathy and wished her son well. A few days later I once again encountered Rodica at the center, but on this occasion she was in a very cheerful mood – her son had come out of his coma and was faring much better than she had expected. Contributing to her high spirits was that it happened to be International Women’s Day (March 8), festivities being held at the center in recognition of the holiday at no cost to visitors. Over several hours, we chatted, danced to folk music, ate and drank. Two days later I again found Rodica at the center despite rainy and cold weather that kept most other visitors away. I commented to her that the celebration on International Women’s Day had been a success. She wholeheartedly agreed and then added that such events were important to her particularly because they allowed her to “get away from the stress” (“*a ieși din stresul*,” lit. to “exit” from the stress) created in her life by many circumstances, including her son’s illness.

Rodica's reference to "stress" caught my attention. It was one of the first times someone in Galați used the word in a conversation with me – I had even noted a few days prior that I was surprised not to hear people say they were "stressed out" when they described their lives. Following Rodica's utterance, this changed virtually overnight: pensioners and younger people, men and women began telling me with frequency that they were experiencing "stress," and indeed this was the word they used. These references to stress were largely unprovoked by me; that is, I generally avoided using the word "stress" in talking with people at first because I was not certain how familiar they were with the meaning of this "foreign" word. I also did not use the word much simply because I wanted to learn from my informants how they felt about their lives rather than to hear them echo a particular framing of their experiences that I "gave" them. As a result of all this talk of stress, I came to believe that an "epidemic of stress" was rippling across the population with which I was having contact. Believing that this was a very important development in my research, I paid attention to these references to stress, cataloging both the different circumstances people attributed to the problem and the health conditions they were certain resulted from it.

This chapter explores ethnographically the "stress epidemic" in post-socialist Galați. I present a number of vignettes of the new stressors affecting pensioners, which are backed in some cases by quantitative data. These stressors are categorized as either "material" or "social" in their dimensions, leaving, however, for the next chapter discussion of stress created by health problems and encounters with the healthcare system because of its enormity and the moral issues tied to it. The chapter continues with a discussion of the increasingly widespread tendency among pensioners to attribute health

conditions to this generalized stress, a significant changeover from the earlier practice among working-class people of attributing their physical and psychological problems to specific conditions they experienced particularly in their work lives as we saw in the previous chapter. I have argued that these changes relate to the increasing absorption of Romania into global capitalism, a process that has disrupted more “local” understandings of health and illness.

Material Stressors

I became acquainted with Mihaela Florescu, the retired doorkeeper who balked at my query about healthcare reform in Romania, through her friend and neighbor Alexandra, the woman who underwent heart bypass surgery. Similar to Alexandra, Mihaela suffered a number of health problems, diabetes and hypertension being the most serious. I asked Mihaela, as I had Alexandra, to explain why she believed she had these problems, both of which began about three years after she had retired (which was seven years earlier) – and, like Alexandra, she too said it was because of “stress, problems, troubles” (*stresul, problemele, necazurile*). I asked her to describe her stressors:

Because you¹ spend time thinking about tomorrow. How are you going to manage? That is the problem. Today you have enough to get by, but, tomorrow, how will you get food if you don’t have money? [Mihaela earned a pension of 1.7 million lei (approximately \$50) per month.²] For example, today I have nothing but 1,500 lei

¹ It is very meaningful that Mihaela used the pronoun “you” (*tu*) instead of “I” (*eu*) in at least part of this interaction. She was hardly the only person to describe stress in this way; later I give the example of a man who stated that stress “keeps you awake a night” and there were many other examples of such second-person rendering that I came across. The use of the second person pronoun suggests that people were aware of the social bases of their stress – to them it was hardly a singular experience tied to their psychological make-up but a collective one that resulted from the material and social conditions prevailing in Romania. This observation is similar to one made by Ennis-McMillan, who notes that, in describing their distress over the lack of water, people in a Mexican community rarely said “I am suffering from water;” instead, they typically said “we are suffering from water” (*estamos sufriendo del agua*) indicating that people there, too, were familiar with the “social origins” of their suffering (2001:384).

[\$0.05]. What on earth can I do with 1,500 lei in order to get by until I receive my pension. 1,500 lei! What can I do with this money? Until I receive my pension on the 27th or 28th [Our meeting was on the 10th.] You can imagine can't you the stress and the thoughts [I experience] since I have to go about looking for some place I can borrow money in order to eat. Can you understand this? It is really difficult. Very, very difficult.

I then asked her to tell me about borrowing money, but instead of immediately doing this she told me about other stressors she confronted:

I borrow money, but you know what happens? For building maintenance I owe more than four million lei (c. \$125) and medications, how can I possibly buy them? You tell me, how can I buy medication? What I do, if you can believe me, is take my medication on some days and then for a week I stop taking it because I've run out of money...

Mihaela's story was not unusual. As we have already seen with Alexandra, and will be reminded of often here, material stressors – living with low pensions and recurrently increasing prices for necessities – were an everyday feature in the lives of most pensioners I met. This section explores the depths of this specific problem. I present official statistics on pensions and household expenditures and data I collected on the cost of basic goods. Supporting these are ethnographic data into a number of the most prominent material stressors affecting today's pensioners – the cost of food, expenditures for utilities and household maintenance and the price of pharmaceuticals.

² It may come as a surprise to some readers that people told me what their incomes were. This information was openly shared by most pensioners I met, many showing me their pension stubs without my even asking. Furthermore, they would directly ask me how much money I earned each month. This practice persists from the socialist period, when people's income was not considered a private matter. It is another compelling example, like my landlady's entering "my" apartment whenever she wished, of the culture of "privacy." Reliable sources in Bucharest tell me that the practice of openly talking about income is, however, coming to an end. People have become much more tight-mouthed about what they earn – it is becoming a private matter – an example of how capitalism is having an impact on Romanian culture.

Pensions, household expenditures and the cost of living:
a quantitative perspective

State pensions in Romania – the primary official income among my informants³ – vary in amount according to a number of factors. These include the type of job a person has held, the number of years a person has worked and whether he or she has reached the official age limit for retirement. For some time, pension income also varied according to the year in which a person retired, which resulted from the practice of applying new legislation governing pensions only to people who retired after those laws went into effect. As I point out below, this created consternation among some pensioners, but it was a problem the state began to correct in 2004 in order to draw favor from pensioners in the run-up to national elections. A person who never formally worked due to disability receives a pension consistent with the degree of infirmity, and a dependent of a pensioner who has died earns the survivor's pension. Someone who was persecuted under socialism or who was injured or in some way harmed during the 1989 revolution and a person who is a veteran of the Second World War or the spouse of a veteran receives a supplement to his or her regular pension. Table 1 shows the average income and the total number of pensioners nation-wide according to these categories in 2004. Data for the county of Galați are comparable to these national-level figures, but they are not published in the same manner, providing figures only for “state social insurance pensioners” (Anuarul Statistic al județului Galați 2003) rather than sub-dividing this category as in Table 1. Although this suggests that pensioners in the county and city of Galați live materially at the same level as pensioners throughout the country, one must bear in mind

³ No one I met had a private pension. These became mandatory in 2007 for people 35 and under. Some people I know in the capital who are older than 35 have private pensions they have taken out on their own.

that pension income for several other regions of Romania, especially Transylvania and greater Bucharest, is higher, a fact obscured by the data for the entire nation.

Table 1
Average Monthly Pension and Number of Pensioners
(2004, figures are for Romania)⁴

Category	Pension Income	Total # of Recipients
Pensioners who have reached the official age limit (60 for women/65 for men) and have fully paid into the system (30 years for women/35 for men)	3,390,000 lei (\$104) ⁵	2,258,000
Pensioners who have reached the official age limit and have partially paid into the system	1,600,000 lei (\$49)	900,000
Pensioners who have paid into the system at least ten years beyond the legal requirement but have not reached the official age for retirement	3,650,000 lei (\$112)	12,000
Pensioners who have paid into the system for up to ten years beyond the legal requirement but have not reached the official age for retirement	2,170,000 lei (\$66)	106,000
Disability pension		
critical (level I)	2,080,000 lei (\$64)	32,000
serious (level II)	1,880,000 lei (\$57)	552,000
moderate (level III)	1,770,000 lei (\$54)	206,000
People who have not worked outside the home and whose formerly employed spouse has died	1,230,000 lei (\$38)	665,000
Pensioners who worked in agriculture	740,000 lei (\$23)	1,474,000

Source: Anuarul Statistic al României 2005c: 6.3 (Numărul Mediu al Pensionarilor) and 6.5 (Pensia Medie Lunară)

⁴ Figures for the county of Galați were similar to these. The number of pensioners per category was also proportionately similar at the county level.

⁵ U.S. \$1.00 = 32,700 lei (average for 2004) Source: cursvalutar.kappa.ro (accessed September 30, 2006; this website allows one to track the history of the dollar/leu exchange rate)

Official pension income was insufficient to meet most retirees' basic needs. This was especially the case for people in the final two categories shown in Table 1. Disproportionately, these were women – they have been hit harder than men by the post-socialist transformation. Indeed, as others have shown (Fodor 2002, Fodor et al. 2002 and see selections in Gal and Kligman, et al. 2000), poverty in Eastern Europe after 1989 has been broadly feminized. Expenditures for utilities, building maintenance and public transportation listed in Table 2 are averages based either on what pensioners said they paid for home heating, electricity and related items or on data I gathered from official sources. Charges for building maintenance were not the same in every apartment complex, thus the figure provided is an estimation; that said, it was rare for pensioners to complain about different charges from one building to another for maintenance even if I do give an example of such below, suggesting that the amount was relatively similar from one place to another. The table includes prices for several conventional foodstuffs, cleaning agents, toiletries and the local newspaper.

Table 2

Expenses for Basic Goods and Services (2004)

Building maintenance, including heat (one month)	1,740,000 lei (c. \$ 53.00)
Electricity (approximately one month)	300,000 (9.00)
Telephone, service allowing only reception of calls (one month)	71,000 (2.00)
Television, basic service (one month est.)	100,000 (3.00)
Local newspaper subscription (one month)	98,000 (3.00)
Public transportation, one-way trip on city bus twenty roundtrips	5,000 (0.15) 100,000 (3.00)
Train ticket, round trip Galați-Bucharest second-class	520,000 (16.00)
Food, cleaning agents, toiletries ⁶	
1 lt. sunflower oil	33,990 (1.04)
1 kg. cornmeal	16,490 (0.50)
1 kg. rice	19,490 (0.60)
500 g. pasta	11,990 (0.37)
1 loaf white bread	6,000 (0.18)
1 lt. milk	32,290 (0.99)
1 kg. cheese	139,990 (4.28)
1 kg. feta cheese	64,990 (1.99)
1 kg. pork meat with bone	134,900 (4.13)
1 kg. sausages	82,900 (2.54)
1 kg. sugar	16,390 (0.50)
900 g. laundry detergent	33,990 (1.04)
250 g. dish washing soap	14,990 (0.46)
125 ml. toothpaste	39,990 (1.22)
Total	648,390 (19.82)
TOTAL	3,580,000 lei (c. \$ 109.00)

Tightening even further the financial squeeze on pensioners were payments for medical consultations, pharmaceuticals, lab tests, surgery, hospital stays and transportation to healthcare facilities in the capital or other major cities, a problem, with the exception of expenditures for medicines, I explore in chapter five. Supporting this

⁶ These prices are from advertisements distributed by the local branch of a transnational supermarket name Billa. The prices were competitive with those at the city's open air markets and smaller grocery stores.

observation is a government study of household expenditures for healthcare services over a three year period (1996 to 1999), which shows that personal outlays for such services were increasingly cutting into the average citizens' monthly budgets (Marcu et al. n.d.). This was especially the case among pensioners given their greater healthcare needs. Adding to this burden was a variety of taxes pensioners had to pay, including property taxes, taxes on pensions and cemetery lot taxes.

Government subsidies to the retired for food, transportation and utilities eased the strain of household expenses only modestly. Packets of staples were distributed to the elderly by the Pensioners' Foundation each month with the support of the local government, but as I show below they were insufficient to meet pensioners' needs. Monthly passes for public transportation were offered at no charge to pensioners, but these covered transport on only a single bus or tram line and pensioners had to wait each month in long lines at kiosks to obtain the passes. Home heating was subsidized by the state; in 2006 pensioners who earned three million lei per month or less received a reduction of approximately 80% in their monthly heating bill. But the remaining charge still weighed heavily on people. Of course, many pensioners were not burdened by rent payments, either because they owned their homes outright, having paid off affordable mortgages during the socialist period, or because in the early 1990s they purchased the dwellings they had occupied cost-free under socialism as employees of state enterprises, paying a government-stipulated low price. Some pensioners benefited from remittances kin sent from abroad. Still, data amassed by the state on household expenditures among pensioners (see Table 3) reveal their marginality: in 2004 pensioners spent nearly three-quarters (73.1%) of their official monthly income on food, utilities, household and

building maintenance, rent and healthcare services, not including gratuities for medical services.

Table 3
Average Expenditures among Pensioners
(national-level percentages)

Food and nonalcoholic beverages	49.4
Rent and utilities	17.5
Health care	6.2
Alcoholic beverages and tobacco products	5.4
Transportation	5.0
Clothing	4.0
Communication	3.4
Furniture and home repairs	2.9
Entertainment	2.8
Miscellaneous products and services	2.0
Education	0.7
Hotels and restaurants	0.7

Source: Population Income and Consumption in the first trimester of 2004 National Statistics Institute, Bucharest, 2004

These statistical data provide only a thumbnail sketch of the material stressors pensioners confronted. Expectedly, most of my insights into their economic marginality came from observations I made and interactions I had with people. I now turn to several of these.

“We don’t even eat peas anymore”:
the stress of food insecurity

On a cold January morning shortly after I arrived in Galați to begin research, I went to the Foundation with the anticipation that I would be re-introduced to visitors at the recreational center. I headed first to the administrative offices to meet a social worker who said she would make introductions, but I quickly noticed our plans would need to be rescheduled because staff members were occupied with preparations for distributing packets of food to pensioners. Several people were already lining up in a main hall adjacent to the administrative offices awaiting their opportunity to get a packet. I was invited to stay and offered a seat in the office where people would receive approval for a packet, which was free of charge.

Over a period of many hours I observed several dozen warmly dressed women and men request a packet, which contained a kilogram each of corn meal, sugar and wheat bran and a liter of sunflower oil. These staples, which originated in Romania, had a retail value of approximately \$2.50. People made mămăligă with the corn meal; they fermented the wheat bran to make borsch that they added to soup, the Foundation also promoting its consumption because of purported medicinal properties; they used the sunflower oil in everyday food preparation and they added the sugar to tea, coffee and canned or baked goods. In order to qualify for a packet, an individual’s monthly income could not exceed two million lei (\$60). Most beneficiaries gave documentary proof of their official earnings although a few who seemed well known to the administrator received a packet without any evidence of their income. Most people said their pensions were an amount in the range of one to two million lei (\$30 to \$60), and, unsurprisingly, the majority of recipients were women, a pattern which reflected the comparatively lower

pensions they received, my later learning from a Foundation administrator that they predominantly served women on account of their lower earnings. In some cases, younger men and women picked up packets for their older relatives.

On that day I was informed that the Foundation distributed food packets monthly and that several hundred people were served by it. The contents of the packets changed from one month to another; in February 2004, for example, they included a frozen chicken, olives, sugar and a can of dried fish, all of which, excluding the olives, were produced in Romania just like the items in the January packet. The Foundation staff spent tremendous effort administering the program, staff members not only giving packets to people who came to the Foundation over several days each month but also taking them to pensioners who could not pick them up. The cost of each distribution was high, but, as mentioned above, a large portion of the revenue for it came from local government coffers.

There were many signs that the packets were important to people. The large turnout on the January day that I made the observation was one, especially given that it was not only bitterly cold, but that it was also treacherous to walk on most sidewalks because the city had failed to clear them following a recent snowstorm. I myself fell on my way to the Foundation that day and later learned on television that the local hospital had been flooded with people, especially older women, seeking treatment for broken bones from falling on ice. In the ensuing months I calculated the program's importance from the frequency with which people talked about it. Several complained that the packets were smaller than in the past and a few frustratedly told me that they had lost their qualification for a packet because their pension had surpassed the specified limit,

which over time had been adjusted downward. One man who had been cut off from receiving a packet even said that the reason the distribution had been reduced was because Foundation administrators were diverting program funds to their personal budgets, an unsubstantiated allegation that nevertheless revealed the material, and the psychological, importance of the food packets to people. This was revealed when some people told me that they worried about losing access to the packets because other visitors to the center lied to administrators about people's income.

This monthly program was not the only indication that pensioners had difficulty managing the cost of food. As happened in Bucharest years earlier, in Galați I regularly encountered pensioners "begging" in public, the neighborhood in which I lived before moving in with Victoria's family being a particularly common site for this probably because some residents there had above-average incomes. When I visited a small marketplace in the neighborhood I would often see older people, mostly women, waiting outside grocery stores and kiosks selling bread, some of them obviously attempting to attract sympathy by displaying icons and holding their left palms upward while others being much less overt about their purpose for lingering in public; in other words, it was not always clear that someone was "begging." There was even one woman who sat on a concrete ledge outside a grocery store with her pawn resting on her lap who appeared to be blind. As noted in chapter two, it was pensioners who gathered at cemeteries and churches in anticipation of the food and drink given freely as *pomană*, more detail of which I give in chapter six from the perspective of one woman who relied on such handouts. Yet another sign of the difficulty pensioners experienced managing their budgets for food was their inability to purchase items recommended by doctors for

maintaining their health, a problem, as illustrated in the introduction, about which Alexandra complained and which a family doctor told me was widespread.

I gained more private glimpses into food insecurity among pensioners as well. Rodica Dragomir took me during a visit to her home to the refrigerator in her small studio apartment telling me that “the wind is blowing” (“*bate vântul*”) in it, an idiom meaning it was nearly empty. Inside I saw a few eggs, a half-filled pot of sour soup and a couple of bags of chicken. Although this was not the only place she kept food, dry staples and canned goods stored elsewhere, and the refrigerator was not in fact completely empty, food scarcity was clearly a recurrent stressor in Rodica’s life. I took notice on the same visit during which she showed me her refrigerator that she twice pointed out that she was unable to afford even a glass of milk, and she said then that she often thought about food. During that visit and on other occasions, she expressed gratitude toward her children for periodically inviting her to dinner despite living with their own hardships. Contributing to this ethnographic “evidence” that the cost of food was a problem for Rodica was her exuberance on International Women’s Day. As pointed out above, not only was her son doing far better than she had anticipated, but the Foundation offered food and drink at no cost to visitors. Nearly everyone, including Rodica, enthusiastically dashed to the tables when the offerings were laid out.⁷

Victoria Dobre, too, complained of food insecurity. At one point before I moved in with her family she mentioned being tired of eating only “potatoes and peas.” After saying this she paused, however, and then added: “but we don’t even eat peas anymore

⁷ Some people frowned upon this, including a woman whose pension was higher than those of many other people who came to the center. Using an idiom meaning that the other women were poorly behaved, she said “they don’t have seven years at home” (“*n-au șapte ani acasă*”) indicating that their parents had failed to raise them properly in the years preceding their entry (typically at age seven) into school.

because they have reached 30,000 lei (\$0.92) [a kilogram].” Of course, living with her family gave me intimate insight into household expenditures for food even if my rent partially contributed to their food budget. A significant portion of what we consumed came from Serghei’s gleaning and gardening; and his fishing contributed to meals – strategies I discuss below. A typical lunchtime meal during my June 2006 stay consisted of soup made with a hen, which Victoria complained was old and took hours to cook; a plate of peas from their son-in-law’s garden we had shelled a day or two earlier; one-to-two day old bread, which had lost its freshness; squash, also from the garden, which had been canned in brine; and tap water, even though the midday meal is usually the largest. On another afternoon we ate sour soup containing herbs, a bit of egg and thin pasta; squash from the garden, which was filled with pork; small patties of meat mixed with herbs; little fish Serghei had caught and mămăligă from corn he had gleaned and taken to a mill for grinding. The meat for this second meal was my contribution, its presence at the table otherwise relatively rare. This was especially so in 2006 because Serghei no longer served pigeon, having gotten rid of his flock. The birds had lived in a coop on the balcony and been a periodic source of food until the bird flu virus (H5N1) began infecting poultry in a number of areas close to Galați earlier in the year and the government urged people to get rid of any birds in their homes. Despite occasionally consuming bread, again typically my contribution, more often we ate mămăligă Serghei prepared. It crowned the small table at which we sat in the kitchen, and in a unifying gesture we ate it from the same plate.

We already know, of course, that food scarcity is not a phenomenon entirely new to the post-socialist period. As I described in chapter two, basic food items were rationed

by the government for a time after the war and during the 1980s, and stores were often empty or had very few items for sale, forcing people to rely on the informal market or on kin with access to land to secure food for household consumption. There are, however, big differences between people's experiences in the 1980s and the scarcity pensioners face in the post-socialist period, including that today stores and markets are filled with food at prohibitive prices and most people no longer have the alternative routes to obtaining food that they had under socialism. Facing prices they cannot afford, often they have no other direction in which to turn and therefore just do without.

“The heat really eats you up”:
anxieties about utilities and building maintenance

An unexpected insight into pensioners' anxieties about the cost of building maintenance and utilities came on a spring morning in 2004 at the recreational center. While I was playing rummy with several pensioners, an administrator entered the center with two unarmed police officers and announced that they would make a presentation about a newly developed “Community Policing” program. Although a few men were initially reluctant to pay attention, one shuffling his playing chips after the announcement was made, irritating one woman so much that she sternly rebuked him, everyone eventually paused their game playing and conversing, and one of the officers began to describe the program to us. Explaining that it had been put together at the request of officials involved in administering Romania's bid for accession to the European Union, he said that its primary goal was to reform police officers from authorities people distrusted to public servants upon whom they could rely. In order to reinforce this message, they passed around a brochure from the County Police Inspectorate entitled

“Community Policing: Together for Your Security” (*“Poliția de Proximitate: Împreună pentru Siguranță”*).

Following their brief presentation, the officers opened the floor to questions about the program. After a somewhat awkward moment of silence, a pensioner named Georgeta Stan spoke. Curiously, or so it at first seemed to me, she did not comment on the program, however – instead, she began to describe rainwater leaking into her home. This was a problem affecting many people who lived on the top floors of apartment buildings, including me. Water drips off ceilings and walls whenever it rains because of faulty roof construction, and over time mold accumulates on these surfaces. Local newspapers regularly carried advertisements for contractors who repaired such leaks through a refurbishing process known as “water isolation” (*hidroizolare*). These repairs were costly, as I directly observed when my landlord decided to refurbish the roof over my apartment because water was coming through the ceiling whenever it rained; the cost was initially around \$200, but it went up when the work became more complicated than anticipated, and I was not certain if the \$200 even included the cost of materials. Although the cost of repairs was shared by everyone in an apartment building, it was the responsibility of the residents experiencing the leaks to persuade the head of their building association⁸ and the majority of households in an apartment complex to agree to them.

In the case of my apartment, several members of the Niculescu family came together to manage the problem: Mihnea, who as mentioned in chapter two had come all

⁸ The head of a building association is a person elected by the homeowners of a set of apartment buildings. This person often holds considerable power vis-à-vis local authorities and may be able to persuade officials to allocate funds to aid in the management of problems, such as leaky ceilings (Anca Romantan 2006: personal communication).

the way from Timișoara in western Romania to take care of the matter, took photographs of the affected ceilings and walls and brought the head of the building association to see the damage for himself; his mother “lobbied” building residents to persuade them to agree to the repairs and, once they got approval to do the refurbishing, his father watched over the entire process to be sure it was done properly. Not everyone could muster the financial, and “human,” resources available to the Niculescus; if they could not handle their portion of the cost or failed to convince others that the renovation was necessary, the leaking persisted. This was the case for Georgeta, who raised the issue with the hope that the police could assist her in some way with it. Although, as I noted, it at first seemed odd to me that she would bring up this matter with the police, she was not alone in feeling that a rare opportunity had arisen to share one of her major concerns with an authority figure. Following Georgeta, another woman complained to the police about the cost of winter heating, emphasizing in particular her dissatisfaction over variation in pricing from one neighborhood to another. As I noted above, this was, however, a relatively rare complaint from pensioners.

With mild frustration, one of the police officers responded that they had come to talk about personal safety rather than to address matters related to household repairs and utilities, which he said should be discussed with other authorities. He then began making suggestions for how people could protect themselves from petty crime. Unfortunately, I had to leave the meeting at this point, but even this brief observation made a lasting impression on me. In raising concerns that were not quite compatible with the purpose of the meeting, and in particular bringing these up to police officers, who routinely were

viewed as corrupt and ineffective, the women strikingly revealed the material and psychological weight of building maintenance and utilities expenses on pensioners.

In the succeeding months I observed many other retirees and their family members struggling to manage costs for repairs and utilities. They tried to keep them under control by cutting back on electricity use, interrupting phone service, avoiding using hot water and, if they could personally control their use of heat, turning off their radiators⁹ and instead warming their homes, or at least their kitchens, with natural gas from their stoves, the cost of which was lower than using a radiator and was anyway shared by all the households in a building. Some pensioners attempted to lessen the impact of the charges through arrangements with their building associations allowing them to stagger their payments over the entire year. Vasile Maniu, for example, relied on such a dispersed payment plan because his monthly pension of 2.9 million lei (\$90) did not cover the cost of winter heating when it regularly came due, his telling me that he had to do this because “the heat really eats you up” (“*căldură asta te mănâcă*”). Still, price increases for repairs and services were so frequent that cutting back on use or arranging payment plans did not help people very much, and, as mentioned above, the subsidies from the state for heating provided only a piecemeal benefit. Added to this, some building maintenance and utilities charges came almost out of the blue. The Tomescus, for instance, told me that one day scaffolding was put up around their building so that it could be painted. They met this restoration, which had not been announced as Felicia told me was legally required, with alarm because they knew that the cost of painting

⁹ An initiative to encourage homeowners to attach meters to radiators allowing them to regulate their consumption of heating was launched while I was in the field. Not everyone could afford the meters, leaving them in the bind of being charged for something they could not pay for because they could not pay for an instrument to control their use of it... People found this especially unnerving when on rare occasions the city provided heat when it was warm outside.

would be divided evenly among building residents. The added expense would upset the precarious balance in which they already held their household expenses.

Costs for repairs and utilities were thus a source of recurrent anxiety to most pensioners. Talk of the upcoming charges for heating peppered my conversations with informants as the weather began to grow colder, and many people were burdened with debt to their building associations for building maintenance and heating. This was the case, for example, for approximately 20 percent of the households in the apartment building consisting of 45 units in which Victoria's family lived; their collective debt as of June 2005 for repairs and utilities had accumulated to \$18,000,¹⁰ the Dobres owing several hundred dollars of this. At that time, Victoria told me this caused her "shame," but when I returned in June 2006 to find their and other people's debt had deepened, she was much more stressed about it. An official document had been posted next to the chart showing the household arrears, stating that people failing to pay for services and repairs risked being taken to court. As a result, Victoria said she was very apprehensive about the possibility of being "evicted." Although eviction would seem to be unlikely because they owned the apartment, Victoria said she had heard of people being "thrown into the street" because they had not paid their monthly bill. It was difficult to be certain about the meaning of Victoria's concern. On the one hand, I wondered if she was trying to magnify the problem to gain sympathy from me, but on the other hand the letter posted at the building entrance did look ominous and, given how much life had changed in general

¹⁰ I obtained this figure from a chart posted at the building's entrance, which showed monthly charges for maintenance, heat and other services and indicated which households were indebted to the association. Such charts were displayed at the entrances to all apartment buildings. The chart did not provide information on household composition beyond number of residents in each unit. Because of this I do not know how many pensioners were responsible for the debt. Nevertheless, the size of the debt and the presence of indebted households in most buildings I entered in Galați were an indication of the general extent of the problem.

in the post-socialist era, it did make sense that she, or anyone, would draw stark conclusions from it about her family's prospects.

Whether Victoria's reaction was out of proportion with the possible repercussions of her family's not paying their bill, collective debt in Galați, and some other Romanian cities, for winter heating and hot water was indeed a problem of such significance that the city eventually took serious measures to reduce it. These included cutting back on furnishing heat and hot water to the population. In 2004, heat was no longer supplied in many neighborhoods after March 20 and resumed only in early-to-mid-November. Romania's continental climate made this insufficient, as was evident during a cold snap in early October 2004, which required people to dress very warmly indoors. Even if this lack of heating was only a minor threat to public health, it affected the well-being of the most vulnerable, including some older people. Hot water was shut off throughout most of the city ostensibly to "do repairs" on the system for several weeks in August 2004 and again for about a month during each of the following two summers, leaving people to wash themselves in cold water or to spend money heating water on their stoves for washing.¹¹

The lack of heating in early November 2004 prompted Felicia Tomescu to say that she was reminded of life under Ceaușescu in the 1980s. There was, however, a big difference between the two periods. Under socialism the main challenge the population faced was the absence of these services; they lived in cold apartments, cooked with limited gas and managed with erratic electricity. As with food, absence was no longer the major issue during my research even if there were the breaks in service that, more

¹¹ Potable water was shut off in June 2005 in the Moldovan city of Roman with a population of about 81,000 to the north of Galați because of a collective debt of 30 billion lei (one million dollars).

than anything, frustrated people. It was rather the prohibitive cost of services and repairs that caused people to feel so apprehensive. As winter approached or as they watched themselves slip into ever-greater debt, they worried about the uncertain consequences.

“I had to be content with tea”:
the prohibitive cost of pharmaceutical drugs

I gained an early insight into the difficulty pensioners experienced handling the cost of pharmaceuticals on a February morning in 2004. While walking along a main avenue near the city center, I encountered Rodica Dragomir. She was coming from her family doctor with a prescription for medication to treat hypertension, a reading at the office having shown her systolic blood pressure to be 210.¹² The diagnosis of extreme hypertension was upsetting enough to her, but she said the whole experience was made worse by the fact that she had no way of paying for the medication. Fluttering the prescription in front of me, she made clear the lack of control she felt by saying that “we are like leaves on a stream” (“*suntem ca frunze pe apă*”). When I asked her about the prescription a few weeks later, she said that she did indeed fill it, but only by borrowing 700,000 lei (\$21) from a family member. She was not happy about this because of the risk the borrowing posed to her reputation. In a gesture signifying very bad manners, she pointed to her cheek with her forefinger, saying it would be “impertinent” (“*obraznica*”) of her to fail to pay back the loan.

In spite of the psychological strain she felt, Rodica was actually fortunate relative to other pensioners I met. Many of them, such as the retired doorkeeper Mihaela Florescu as we saw earlier, left medications unfilled because they could not afford them.

¹² Most people never mentioned their diastolic readings when telling me about their blood pressure.

Victoria Dobre, in another example, showed me a collection of prescriptions for her different health conditions that she had not taken to the pharmacy because of their cost. Felicia Tomescu as well described periodically having to go without a blood circulation medication to treat the long-term effects of her polio infection. She said that financial assistance from the state for the medication was insufficient and that Adrian's pension was more often directed toward treating his health conditions, which were serious; he ultimately died from them in summer 2007 – an indication of intrahousehold gender inequality. An attempt Felicia made at one point to borrow 100,000 (\$3) from a neighbor so that she could purchase her medication failed,¹³ and on another occasion she renounced the drug for about two months, saying she “had to be content with tea” even though she had reached the point at which she felt “extremely bad.”

Access to affordable medication for pensioners was so limited that it became a major political issue in the 2004 national election, a matter to which I return in chapter seven. Still, it was but one of several healthcare expenses encumbering the retired population, out-of-pocket costs for consultations, surgery and post-operative treatment and payments for medical supplies being additional burdens. The morally complicated problem of cash payments for services is taken up in chapter five.

Social Stressors

Although the unaffordable cost of food, building maintenance, utilities, medications and other necessities – the “material” stressors – were among the first challenges about which people told me, these were not the only sources of stress in the

¹³ Believing they had plenty of money, she said they had lied to her. Several people told me borrowing had grown more difficult in the post-socialist period, a matter I discuss in chapter six.

lives of pensioners. There were also a number of “social” stressors that they confronted. This section explores such stressors. We will see that, as with the material stressors, most of these are new to the post-socialist period and therefore they show us even further the breadth of the rupture that has occurred since the end of socialism. In fact, some of these social stressors, although perhaps less immediately tangible than the material ones, in my opinion seemed to be even more unsettling to pensioners in post-socialist Galați than the material deprivation.

“I’m used to having them at my table”:
the dispersal of kin and related stressors

When I met Raluca Barbu her three adult children held jobs outside Romania. Two of them lived in Italy working in health care and one was employed in information technology in Spain although she later moved to the United Arab Emirates to take up a position in the same sector. Raluca described having very good personal relationships with her children, and she said that they supported her materially, sending her cash remittances, pharmaceuticals, books and other items on a regular basis. Moreover, they invited her to visit them in their new homes, covering the costs of the trips. Raluca described their generosity as flowing from the strong emotional ties she had with them, especially her son, but it seemed to me that their gift-giving at least in part also resulted from the anticipation of one day receiving a sizable inheritance (recall that their family had land). This meant that Raluca had more power in “negotiating” her relationships with her children than I observed among many other older people, some of whom, in their words, were abandoned by their children, an experience that would have been far less likely if they had had valuable goods to bequeath. Raluca nonetheless complained

about her pension being too low and she worked after retirement to bring in more money, but her children's support clearly helped to alleviate the material stressors I described above, placing Raluca in what appeared to be a somewhat enviable position vis-à-vis other pensioners I knew, few of whom benefited from remittances. Still, Raluca was very unhappy. This was because she disliked the fact that her children had to live so far away from her in order to make a living, leaving her socially isolated when what she wanted more than anything was contact with them.

She described the psychological impact of their living so far away in the following manner:

It's very difficult, I'm telling you... We Latins are like this, more... We aren't like other nationalities. The Germans have a child, the child is married off and that's that. They're no longer interested in them. We aren't like this. We are the opposite. Parents and especially mothers are tied to their children until the mother has left this world. So I feel... it's really difficult. I'm used to having them at my table eating with me, but they are no longer here... But one of them, one of my daughters, is coming this month... She's coming home on the 14th and will stay two weeks because she is on break from her studies there. It will make me happy to see her.

But when I asked Raluca how often the daughter visited, she said:

Once a year when she is on vacation. I find it difficult to see her only once a year, but what can I do about it?

We then spoke a bit more about the material support her children gave her and effort

Raluca made to reciprocate, but soon thereafter we were again talking about the

conditions that had caused her children to leave Romania and how Raluca felt about the matter:

If there were work available, my children wouldn't need to leave the country. They would stay here and I would be happy. So, you see, this situation really grinds on you (*te mai macină*). There is

no pleasure in knowing that they are in another country among strangers...

I asked her to expand on this thought:

They are among strangers, in another country, among strangers. I mean, it would be fine if they were just going away on a trip but not to stay there and to take up work there, but the need for work pushes them away.

Later in the conversation she said she “strongly hoped” accession to the European Union would “bring work for our children” so that they could come home and be with their kin.

Although Raluca disliked the fact that she was socially isolated from her children, as indicated above her experiences with them after they left Romania were actually quite positive relative to those some other people had had with their children. One woman, an infrequent visitor of the recreational center whom I never came to know well, told me about her son’s departure from the country. He had left Romania for work, but she had not heard from him since, being unaware even of where he was. Although I never learned any details about their relationship, it was clear that his disappearance from her life was upsetting to her for many reasons, including that she did not even know if he were alive and safe. Some other pensioners told me of losing contact with children who had left the country, lack of knowledge about their condition or fragmentary news of their whereabouts causing them great concern. And others described being very unhappy about being cut off from children who had migrated for work to other parts of the Romania where job opportunities were greater, a common experience exemplified by my landlord Mihnea when he lost his job at *Sidex*. They told me they were unable to visit their children even on special occasions because they could not afford the transportation costs and said that therefore they went long periods with, at most, contact with their children by telephone.

From Victoria Dobre I gained a somewhat different perspective on the stress pensioners experienced from the lack of employment opportunities in Romania for their children. Her youngest son Iulian, who was in his early thirties, was working as an agricultural laborer in Greece when Victoria and I made our acquaintance, and he had spent several years prior to that working in construction in Israel, all because he had been unable to find good-paying work in Romania. Like Raluca, Victoria said that she disliked that he was so far away, hoping, too, that accession to the European Union would expand job opportunities. When I returned to Galați in spring 2005, Iulian had himself returned to Romania, and he had moved back in to his parents' home. He was unemployed and looking for work on the domestic market as well as abroad. Only after some months did he find a position at *Sidex* as an unskilled laborer, but it involved very strenuous, low-paying work. He continued to hold this position, and to live with his parents, when I returned in 2006.

Victoria seemed grateful that Iulian had returned safely to Galați, but she still experienced a lot of anxiety over him. Instead of feeling uneasy about his welfare in a distant country, she was now troubled by the instability of his work life in Romania. This concern was so great, especially when he was unemployed in 2005, that on several occasions she even asked me whether I could make arrangements for him to take up work in the U.S. But Victoria's worries over Iulian reached into other areas of life. The apprehension she experienced over Iulian's uncertain work life was coupled with concern over instability in his personal life. She pointed out that by the time he was 30 he had been married and divorced twice, the first time for four years and the second for seven months, and that since returning to the city he had not developed a stable relationship

with anyone. Victoria largely blamed the failed marriages on his former wives, saying that women had changed dramatically since she was young; she believed their main goal now was to gain materially from men rather than to support them, an interpretation of change since 1989 I revisit in chapter five because of its moral undertone. But the divorces, and Iulian's lack of a stable relationship since returning to Galați, provoked more than moral concern from Victoria; she was worried, too, about the "practical" implications of the instability of Iulian's personal life. Victoria said she strongly desired for him to find a woman who would take care of him so that she would no longer be occupied with how he would look after himself. Not helping matters was Iulian himself, who Victoria said was a self-styled "vagabond" (*golan*) who wanted to lead a freewheeling life.

The lack of steady, gainful employment in Romania led to more than pensioners' children departing for work abroad or their children's personal lives, at least in their eyes, being disrupted. It also had implications in the lives of the grandchildren of pensioners and in the relationships between pensioners or near-pensioners and their grandchildren. In some cases, the emigration of children meant that pensioners were torn not only from their children but also from their grandchildren if they left the country with their parents. In other cases, grandchildren remained behind while their parents worked abroad, a change which created a number of its own problems. I had insight into a couple of cases that fall into the latter category.

One woman in her early fifties, and seven years from retirement, cared for her grandson, who was about seven, because her daughter had left for Spain some three years earlier in order to find work. The woman described her daughter as working "from one

day to another” (*de pe o zi pe alta*) in restaurants and other places with which the woman seemed only vaguely familiar. Although the daughter made enough money to occasionally send remittances home so that her mother could care for the boy, the amounts she sent were insufficient for meeting all his needs. This induced the grandmother to turn to the state-run Child Protection Agency, where she was able to obtain a monthly stipend of 880,000 lei (or about \$27) to care for the child. This still was not enough, however, given that the grandmother worked “*la negru*,” having lost good-paying, stable employment in a local factory soon after the revolution, and she, therefore, could not spare any of her own income on the boy. Although she was not yet a pensioner, her experience was comparable to one a pensioner would have looking after a grandchild, especially since the woman suffered from several health problems that cost her money and since her monthly income was as dismal as that of many pensioners. Making matters worse, the daughter could not afford to purchase a bus ticket to return to Romania to be with her family, hence the boy’s care had fallen into the grandmother’s hands for what looked like the long-term.

The other example comes from Victoria Dobre’s family. When I returned to Galați in 2006 I learned that one of Victoria’s daughters-in-law had gone to Spain to perform agricultural labor for some months. She normally managed a stall at the city’s Moldovan market, work that she said caused her chronic “stress,” so the possibility of higher-paying employment abroad was very attractive. At least one problem developed out of this decision to depart temporarily, however; her teenage daughter began to misbehave in her absence. Most seriously, the young woman stopped attending school regularly, behavior over which it seems her father had no control since he worked long

hours seven days a week at the market. I was in Galați when the daughter-in-law returned from Spain and had a chance to witness firsthand the impact of this on the woman. Learning that her daughter had missed school, she was rather outraged, sternly telling her that she was lucky she had not been thrown out of school and that she certainly would be if she continued not attending regularly. Watching this interaction, the young woman seemed almost proud of her newfound independence, and I sensed that it would take some work for her mother to regain lost ground. Although this case did not directly affect Victoria or Serghei, it nevertheless illustrates the impact that the lack of work in Romania can have on the lives of pensioners' grandchildren.

Another social stressor for some pensioners that was related to all of these was the experience of living with their children and other kin. This was an experience that was relatively new as well to the post-socialist period. Unlike under socialism when, as we have seen, home ownership was achieved with relative ease, in the post-socialist period rents and mortgages had become unreasonable given that property owners and brokers have been seeking to profit from the newly privatized real estate market. Many young people as a result simply could not move out of their parents' homes. This phenomenon, combined with high unemployment and low income, created strain in many households. For example, Lenuța Moldovan and Cristina Iureș, two of the women I met in the cemetery, were openly distraught about the three-generation households in which they were constrained to live. I observed Lenuța's dwelling when she invited me to her home. She lived together with one of her sons, his wife and their three children in two small rooms that were part of a subdivided house, other families living in other parts of it. Living there was difficult for Lenuța not only because the space was cramped, but also

because she felt her daughter-in-law did not want her there, the most stirring sign of which, according to Lenuța, was the daughter-in-law's practicing witchcraft to worsen a health problem she had. This was the most serious witchcraft accusation I encountered in the field, Lenuța telling me that her daughter-in-law used sorcery also to sicken her son, that is, the daughter-in-law's husband. The matter concerned Lenuța so much that she said she had protected me during a visit to their home by sitting between me and the daughter-in-law so that she could not "rub charms" (*unge*) on me. Furthermore, Lenuța was bothered by the fact that her very small pension from years as a cook was used to provide for the entire household because her son was often too ill to work, since he said he suffered from a serious ulcer, and when he did find work it was usually temporary and paid little, a matter I return to in chapter six when I discuss Lenuța's reliance on *pomană* to secure food for the household. More than desiring the food people handed out at the cemetery as *pomană*, though, she told me she longed for a small apartment to herself so that she could leave her son "in peace." Cristina's experience was similar, her stress flowing mainly from friction between her and her son's female companion, with whom she lived in her modest apartment along with her son, her daughter and her granddaughter.

Not only did the lack of jobs and low income pressure young people to leave Galați for work or force them to continue living with elder kin, but they were also two factors contributing to the public health crisis in the post-socialist era referred to in chapter two. This crisis, too, created stress in the lives of pensioners as we have already seen with Rodica Dragomir, who was overcome by her son's illness and the cost of his treatment. The impact of the crisis on pensioners was more than emotional, however. It

also meant that kin who once could have been relied upon for social support as one grew older were no longer able to provide this because they were themselves too sick, had little or no money left over after treating their own illnesses, or had even passed away. This does not mean that it was unique for some people's adult children to face serious, even life-threatening, illnesses under socialism; this too happened then. What was unusual about the crisis was its scope and the fact that the material and social resources people could rely upon under socialism to get through such health calamities had all but completely dissipated. Suddenly, in other words, many pensioners were not only facing illness among their middle-aged children, but they did not have anywhere to turn to help them out through the crisis or to assist them on a long-term basis. In some cases, their sick adult children had to turn to them for support, as I observed during a visit (together with Constanța Iorga) to the home of a woman who had called upon the Foundation as a last resort because of help she needed with caring for her adult son who lived with her and was seriously ill with hepatitis. The woman tearfully complained to Constanța not only that her son was very ill and completely reliant upon her and her pension but also that she was deeply indebted to her building association for failing to pay her monthly bill, a problem she appeared to be trying to manage by keeping her lights turned off and her heat turned down on that cold March morning.

Children and other kin were not just sources of worry to their older relatives; many provided extensive social support and brought considerable joy into the lives of the retired, facts I return to in the chapter six. My point here has been to show that a number of changes particular to the post-socialist period – joblessness and labor migration, profiteering in the housing market, health decline among the middle-aged and corruption

in the healthcare system (a matter treated at length in the next chapter) – have added stress to the lives of pensioners because of the impact they have had on their kin and, in turn, on themselves.

“Why are you ‘putting signs’ in your room?”:
fear about petty crime

It was not long after arriving in Galați that I gained insight into the fear many pensioners experienced over petty crime. It surfaced in one of my first conversations with Felicia and Adrian Tomescu, who probably felt they were doing a good deed by advising an “unwitting” foreigner about the reach of local criminal activity, when what they were doing was revealing what mattered to them. They vividly mapped out the problem. Petty crime was now widespread, being particularly rampant in outdoor markets and on buses. Traveling in groups of three, people frequently stole from the unaware in both settings, they said, tearing necklaces from people’s necks and using knives to cut wallets out of people’s pockets. Complaining to bus drivers was useless because they often participated in such activity, allowing criminals to steal from the public so long as they received a cut. Worse still was the possibility that criminals might follow one home to carry out a crime, or they might even knock on one’s door. With this in mind, Felicia described efforts by business owners to wrongly make money off of the public by sending people door to door to sell products that were altered in some way, using as an example the story of a neighbor of theirs who purchased packets of “coffee” from such a salesperson only to find that they were filled with much cheaper cornmeal. What all of this crime, which Adrian and Felicia said was new to the post-socialist period, meant was that one simply could not feel secure anymore in one’s home or

opening one's front door. And, more than this, whenever one ventured outdoors there was the risk of falling into criminal hands.

It is true that pensioners in Galați expressed concern about petty crime less often than about the difficulty they faced managing tight budgets, as I have already shown in the community policing forum when no one independently brought up the issue (although their silence in that setting may have resulted from little confidence in the police). Still, it was a matter very much on people's minds and it contributed to the sense of insecurity they felt since 1989. Government statistics supported their perception that criminal activity had burgeoned after socialist rule ended. This was especially the case during the severe economic downturn of the late 1990s, when the number of crime investigations in Galați peaked at 11,643 and the number of recorded infractions grew to 1,811 per 100,000 people. But it was still true in 2004, when 5,079 crime investigations were conducted and 818 alleged infractions per 100,000 people took place (Anuarul Statistic al României 2005a:22.9). That is, although a decline occurred from the late 1990s to 2004, the crime rate was still much higher than it had been in the years immediately following the revolution and certainly than it had been under socialism. Provoking pensioners' concerns about crime was an apparent upsurge in media attention to the problem since 1989. Although I did not gather statistics on the number of "crime stories" covered in the media or "crime shows" aired on television, I had the impression that there were many, and, whatever the number, in any event a marked increase in the coverage of crime in the media had occurred since the end of socialism.

A couple of observations I made seemed to further make sense of many pensioners' worries about crime. Perhaps the most gripping, at least from a personal

perspective, was an alleged mugging in my neighborhood in August 2004. While I was walking along a narrow, tree-lined sidewalk to meet someone at the bus stop one afternoon, a tussle broke out a short distance in front of me between a thin man who was roughly in his thirties and an overweight man around fifty. It involved the older man chasing after the younger one, who seemed to have tried to steal something from him, catching him and possibly punching him; I heard, but did not see, what sounded like a blow. He then took the younger man into an open space next to a kiosk and a small playground where there were other people around, forced him to sit on the ground and called the police, all the while breathing heavily and sweating profusely. I did not hover over the scene for long but did wonder about the impact of the incident not only on the people directly involved but also on those who had observed it. Although it was not a gravely serious event, it did cast a dark shadow over one neighborhood in Galați, even if only temporarily. Another instance of petty crime that seemed to confirm pensioners' worries involved a temporary employee at the Foundation. One day she told several of her colleagues at the Foundation that a large sum of money – approximately her monthly salary – had been stolen from her while she was traveling on the bus. In learning about this I could see once again how people could conclude that Galați was an insecure place in which to move around, a point I return to below.

At the same time, it was fascinating how “legendary” some pensioners' anxieties about crime seemed to be, including those the Tomescus shared; that is, although some people talked about the danger of encountering crime in the city, most had not personally experienced it or they were keeping stories about it from me for some reason, which I think is unlikely, and the stories they told or concerns they expressed about crime often

did not seem to be based on much substance. For example, warnings Lenuța Moldovan gave to me about various dangers in Galați seemed to flow more from ungrounded fear than from actual experience. One of the most memorable ones came toward the end of a meeting we had at the cemetery one day. After I bid her farewell, telling her I would walk about the cemetery a bit before heading home, she stopped me and gave me a warning. It was a very bad idea to just carelessly wander around the cemetery, she said, because there were dangerous people who roamed around the place committing crimes against people. She was stressed not only that they (or possibly other pensioners) might steal her *pomană* offerings, but also that they held people up.

The presence of police in the cemetery did not calm her fear – actually, it made it worse. Lenuța believed that the police used their power to take the *pomană* offerings for themselves after forcing people like her out of the cemetery. I witnessed this “driving out” (“*ne gonește*”) as Lenuța and other pensioners called it, meaning “they’re pushing us out,” on one occasion but did not observe police officers taking any *pomană* offerings at all. Nor was Lenuța forced to leave the cemetery, busying herself with “her” area in order to legitimate her presence there to the officers. In this respect, too, Lenuța’s fear was unsubstantiated; indeed, she appeared not to understand the true purpose of the police’s activity, which was not clear to me either at the time since “giving *pomană*” was a customary practice. What was ironic about her generally negative feelings regarding the police was that they may have been conducting their raid because the authorities were worried, like her, about “crime” of various kinds being committed in the cemetery, even possibly sexual liaisons in what was after all a vast, somewhat overgrown space that

potentially provided the opportunity for illicit behavior – not, in other words, to “drive her out,” but to protect her.¹⁴

Lenuța’s anxiety about crime in Galați did not end at the cemetery. She also cautioned me about carelessly accepting invitations to other people’s homes, as she said I had done to hers. She pointed out that, although I might think people in Romania are well-intentioned, I needed to be aware that they might lure me to their private dwellings in order to steal from me. Although her fear seemed real, as with her concern about my being assaulted in the cemetery, this worry seemed to be based more on “legend” than actual experiences through which people had gone.

Lenuța and the Tomescus were not alone in making what often seemed like unsubstantiated claims about crime. My neighbor Ana Dinescu made similar allegations. The context was quite different, especially from Lenuța’s, given that her status and income were far higher as a result of an influential career she had had managing food stores (*alimentari* – under socialism, this was a powerful position); her husband had also held an important position as an inspector for the Ministry of Education. She had a pension of 3.5 million lei (about \$107) and lived in a modest-sized one-room apartment that she kept clean with the assistance of a woman to whom she paid a small amount of money. She owned several valuable pieces of furniture, a number of fine paintings, and land near a small town a short distance from Galați that had been returned to her through the decollectivization process in the 1990s. Although she gave most of the property to a

¹⁴ I do not have data on the number of crimes committed at the cemetery, but I suspect that they were few or at least did not warrant Lenuța’s fear and the police presence in the place. There seemed little one could easily steal there (except flowers, which Lenuța said people did steal so as to resell them at the entrance to the cemetery) and most people, except poor pensioners, seemed to come to the cemetery in groups or pairs, which would more likely protect them from an assault.

land association because she did not have the means to cultivate it on her own, she retained a quarter hectare where she grew wine grapes, assisted by a few hired hands.

Ana's stories of crime focused on her hired workers. The woman who helped keep her apartment tidy could not be trusted, Ana said; she was convinced the woman stole from her. In addition, she believed that the people who worked her land were thieves, Ana suspecting that they pilfered some of the grapes she grew. The stories sounded compelling probably in good part because of Ana's rather self-assured manner in telling them, but she did not actually ever provide any convincing evidence for her assertions.

Then there was what at first seemed like a rather curious exchange with Victoria Dobre during my June 2006 visit that turned out to be another revealing insight into the seeming hollowness of some pensioners' concerns about crime. Unexpectedly one day she asked me why I was "putting signs" (*a pune semne*) in my room. Somewhat embarrassed, I at first thought she was bothered by fingerprints I had left on the furniture, which was dusty from the soot emitted by the nearby metallurgical plant, so I apologized. Still, I did not quite understand why she expressed her concern in such an indirect manner. Hearing my apology, she corrected my misunderstanding, saying that what she had meant was that she had noticed I carefully arranged my possessions so that I could observe whether anyone in the household had looked through them or had taken anything from me while I was away from the apartment. To illustrate what she meant, she laid out a few items on a dresser. She said this was not a new observation; she had noticed my doing this during my stay in 2005 but had hesitated to tell me. In connection with this I was reminded that from time to time during both stays she always let me know quite

vigorously before she would go into my room, where there was a closet storing some of her family's belongings.

Of course, Victoria's suspicions were false, and I attempted to convince her of this but was never certain I fully succeeded. Although the exchange was mildly upsetting because it suggested she thought I mistrusted them (at the same time, the fact that she was willing to tell me about the matter indicated we had grown closer), it gave me another, and this time particularly interesting, insight into the somewhat "legendary" dimensions of some pensioners' stress over crime. In this case, the experience was in reverse, given Victoria's apprehension about being viewed as a potential criminal or even accused of theft, but it nonetheless offered a penetrating insight into the degree to which some pensioners were psychologically encumbered by thoughts of crime in the post-socialist era.

What is one to make of the seemingly "unreal" nature of the bases for many pensioners' concerns about crime, including those of people of quite different working-class backgrounds? I believe that partially it is a lingering reflection of the surge in crime that began a few years after the revolution and peaked in the 1990s. Although, as I mentioned, criminal activity appears to be less widespread today than it was in that period, it remains much more common than people remember from the socialist period, a condition which influences attitudes. As also noted, the media stoke people's fears by giving disproportionate attention to crimes and criminal activity. But there is another, broader message being sent by these concerns. I believe they mirror, mostly symbolically but in some cases also "for real," the wider rupture that has occurred since 1989 in so much that before the revolution was so certain. Just as people can no longer

rely on their pensions or on stable prices or on money for transportation to visit kin, they feel that they cannot step outside their homes to do anything without something bad potentially happening to them. Today, danger lurks just about everywhere one goes, including in once very familiar places like the cemetery or a home to which one has been invited, and this sense of danger spares few people. Even those with greater means, like Ana, worry about crime in their midst because they too are struggling to manage on very tight budgets; like others, Ana would periodically tell me that she had run out of money for food. In this respect, pensioners' anxieties about crime are all too real because they are symbols of the wider disruption people have very tangibly experienced since 1989.

“I removed the cast myself”:
the stress and strain of waiting

In the introduction I gave a summary of many of the stressors confronting one woman, Alexandra Câmpeanu. As I brought up, waiting for healthcare services was among them, and I noted that this stressor was particularly significant to her because of the serious health problems from which she suffered. Reminding me that she was an “ill person” – in addition to the bypass surgery she had also received treatment for appendicitis and an intestinal occlusion in recent years – she described this stressor to me in the following way:

How can I be asked to wake up at four or three in the morning to get myself down to take a ticket for a place in line to see the doctor? Really, can I possibly go out on the street [at that hour]? Ok, you could say that during the summer this would be possible, but even during the summer you can't because there are dogs on the street [at that hour]. The city is covered with dogs.¹⁵ I can't

¹⁵ Stray dogs were a threat to public health day and night although the problem was worse at night and in the early morning hours when fewer people were on the streets. This was not unique to Galați, stray dogs being a presence in all Romanian cities. According to a doctor at the Hospital for Infectious Diseases who

stand on my feet for such a long time anyway. They should fix the system so that people who are really badly ill can enter the doctor without a ticket or make it so that tickets are available whenever you manage to get there. [At this point] if you go too late, for example, to your family doctor you will not receive a ticket to get in at any time before ten in the morning. So if you go and you don't get a ticket you've wasted your time and have to return on another day.

She went on to contrast the difficulty she experienced gaining access to doctors in Galați with a stay in a hospital in Iași, a city in northeastern Romania with healthcare facilities that offered services unavailable to her at home. As with some other people I came to know, she had been referred there for treatment by a specialist. Saying she did not “have words to describe the experience,” she noted the “cleanliness” of the place and the “attentiveness” of the medical staff. All together, the experience exacerbated the feeling she had that something was very wrong with the conditions one encountered in Galați.

Alexandra was not alone in experiencing stress from waiting for consultations with doctors. Cosmina Banciu, a woman in her seventies who had lived with heart disease since the 1970s, entirely stopped going to her doctor because she said she would “get agitated” (“*fac nervi*,” she said) waiting at the office only to be turned away when the doctor suddenly left for an emergency, an experience she said happened repeatedly. Irritating enough on its own, the matter was made worse by the feeling that the doctor was lying and was instead leaving the office for personal reasons. Similar to Alexandra, she drew a stark contrast between these experiences and others she had gone through with healthcare professionals, in Cosmina’s case the big difference being between the care she received in her youth and the neglect she was encountering as a pensioner.

treated me following a bite I got, it was quite common for people to be bitten. Fortunately, rabies did not exist among stray dogs in Galați. In addition, barking dogs interrupted some people’s sleep.

This apparent neglect affected other people's relationships with their family doctors, Nicoleta Apostol all but renouncing visits to her doctor, despite as well having heart problems, because she said she would only end up wasting half a day waiting to be seen. But perhaps the most vivid insight I gained into the stress and possibly other health consequences people experienced as a result of waiting for health services occurred during a visit to the home of Rodica Dragomir in June 2006. It was the second time we were seeing each other that month. On our first encounter, which was outside the Foundation a few weeks earlier, she was wearing a cast on an arm she had broken in a fall, but on this second meeting the cast was gone. I asked her about getting it removed, and to my surprise she responded "I took the cast off myself." She explained that she did this because she had grown irritated waiting more than three hours at a polyclinic to get it removed. Instead of waiting any longer, she came home, soaked the arm in warm water and cut the cast off herself. Although she said the "procedure" went smoothly enough, unfortunately she was still in pain in a few areas, Rodica pointing to some swollen spots on her arm that ached quite a bit.

In addition to these informants' compelling complaints about waiting for healthcare services in the public system, I made a couple of observations of crowded family doctor waiting rooms that corroborated their concerns. Moreover, some of the younger people I came to know recounted experiences with waiting seemingly endlessly for treatment, with one tale by Grigore Stănescu in particular standing out. It concerned a long wait in the emergency room at the main hospital in Galați with his wife, who was in significant pain.

A family doctor I interviewed offered an explanation for the problem of waiting and the public healthcare system's more general decline since 1989. She characterized the system as "bankrupt" (*"în faliment"*), lacking adequate revenue even for basic equipment and modest salaries. As a result, in her estimation a family doctor's income was equivalent to that of an unskilled worker. Yet, coincident with this decline, the duties a family doctor was required to perform had expanded, each being responsible for an absolute minimum of 500 patients. Most, indeed, cared for far more, between 1,900 and 2,500 people; the doctor I interviewed had over 2,000 patients, comically expressing relief that they did not all come to see her at once.¹⁶ What this meant was that another major structural change in Romania since the end of socialist rule – in this case, the downsizing of the healthcare system – was very tangibly felt when people waited to see their doctors.

Unfortunately, this was not the only "waiting" about which pensioners regularly complained. When a compensated medication program sponsored by the state in August 2004 began to falter less than a year after its inauguration because it ran out of funding, a common feature throughout the country was long lines outside pharmacies honoring such prescriptions. By late spring 2005, these lines were present only during the first few days of each month and only in front of a handful of pharmacies because by then few were filling such prescriptions and even those that did rapidly ran out resources. At that point, I observed lines at three pharmacies in Galați, all of which included many pensioners. Felicia Tomescu described her experience in June of that year obtaining three compensated medications for Adrian. On the first of the month, they were unable to find

¹⁶ Medical professionals did not accept these conditions quietly. During my research they carried out major demonstrations throughout the country on several occasions to draw attention to their low salaries and the inadequate revenue for the healthcare system. I discuss this organizing below.

a pharmacy honoring the prescriptions despite tirelessly searching. On the second, they located one, but the pharmacy had in stock only two of the three medications he needed. The pharmacist told Felicia the third medication would soon arrive, suggesting she pay for all of them and call in a day or two to find out if the third one had come in. She agreed, and the arrangement worked out, Felicia calling several times, which was an expense, until the medication finally arrived. Although in the end they succeeded in getting all the medications at compensated rates, she described the experience as anxiety-provoking and energy-consuming; in all, her travails were aggravated by the difficulty she experienced walking because of her disability. In the same month, reports of pensioners standing in lines at pharmacies in other parts of the country were televised nationally. In Cluj (a city in Transylvania), for instance, a camera captured a woman crying as she expressed fear over her husband's uncertain access to compensated medication for Parkinson's disease and a man saying he was exhausted and annoyed from waiting seemingly interminably to purchase medication (PRO-TV June 6, 2005).

Waiting for public transportation was a feature of pensioners' life as well. While "maxi taxis" (large vans that could transport about a dozen people) were generally quick in picking people up, they cost a few cents more than comparable public transportation. Pensioners, students and others filled the stops waiting for public buses and trams that ran much less frequently, especially as state subsidies lowered the price for some riders and some routes. The route serving the cemetery and neighborhoods in the city's north where I met Lenuța Moldovan was notorious for waiting crowds. On one trip, I encountered a group of about a dozen mostly elderly people, including two previously unacquainted men, one in his eighties and the other his nineties (they told each other their ages),

standing for more than thirty minutes in the June heat. Worse than the fact that it sometimes took a while to arrive, public transportation was often overcrowded, which occasionally resulted in heated exchanges between passengers.

Waiting was certainly not an experience new to the post-socialist era. As mentioned in some of the life histories, standing in line to purchase food was common under socialism, especially in the 1980s. Moreover, waiting for healthcare services took place in that period. For example, Serghei Dobre told me about how he once waited several hours to be helped out following a serious bicycle accident in the 1980s that left him stranded along a road. Although he was eventually picked up by someone, he was taken home rather than to the hospital he said because no one was available there on that day to treat him. It was only the following day that he was transported to the hospital, where he learned he had cracked his pelvis. On the one hand, Serghei's experience suggests the county hospital was suffering from cutbacks following the oil crisis of 1978. On the other hand, he probably felt he could overcome the injury on his own; he expressed similar disregard for aches and pains he was suffering today. The crack to his pelvis turned out to be inoperable, the doctor telling him it would heal naturally and returning a small payment Serghei had made. The experiences in the 1980s of waiting – especially for food – were unquestionably a widespread and exhausting feature of life even if some people shared captivating stories about the “socializing” that went on in such lines. People's experiences of waiting in post-1989 Romania compete with these from the socialist period. Although the burden of waiting may indeed not be as severe today as it was back then – the seemingly interminable lines for food, for instance, no

longer exist – it is without a doubt that the combination of waiting with all of the other uncertainties people face in the post-socialist era makes the experience stressful.

“We don’t attend weddings with pleasure”:
the stress of ceremonial obligations

The *pomană* feast I attended at the Niculescus shortly after arriving in the field was indeed elaborate. It began with an Orthodox priest and his deacon performing a rite at the table where we had gathered to honor the woman who had died 25 years earlier. They recited prayers and sang a soothing hymn as everyone around the table held lighted candles. On the table lay plates filled with tomatoes, olives, salami, ham, pickled fish and cucumbers, stuffed eggs, and sprigs of parsley. There were also several “cakes” in the center of the table, including *colivă*, which is a cake made from buckwheat and nuts that is a centerpiece of rituals honoring the dead, and *cozonac*, a spiced cake commonly served during holidays. After performing the rite, the priest and the deacon joined us in eating the appetizers, but, saying that other duties awaited them, they left before two main courses were served. These included *sarmale*, which is a traditional Romanian dish of cabbage leaves (some also using grapevine leaves, the leaves of a linden tree or some other kind of leaf) stuffed with a mixture of pork and beef, and then a plate of chicken with rice. Dessert topped off this filling banquet. Throughout the meal, wine was served with carbonated water. After the first group of people left, they served a similarly robust meal to family and close kin.

The feast was “food” for much thought. As already noted, although it brought together some friends and family members, it failed to fully reconstitute kin relations among the Niculescus because of the absence of Mihnea and his family; I emphasized

that this marked an important change from the socialist period. At the same time, the meal was indeed very “rich,” which suggested to my still fresh-in-the-field eyes that material life among working-class families in Galați was comfortable. I would soon learn that this was a false impression because the Niculescus were in a somewhat more economically secure position than many of the pensioners, and younger people, I would come to know.

The Niculescus lived in a house they owned, which was rare among my informants, and as I pointed out earlier their household consisted of three generations, Daciana, her parents and her daughter. Daciana had a steady job at a public utility even though she did worry about her position when the enterprise began to restructure, and her father, who was retired and earned a pension, continued to work at another public utility, earning a steady salary. In their yard they had a garden where they grew vegetables that they consumed throughout the year, and their cost-of-living was further eased somewhat by the fact that their expenses for utilities were relatively manageable, at least in comparison to people living in apartments. Adding to their comparably better material position was the apartment owned by Mihnea where I lived.

Although I do not know for certain who took the money I paid for rent, as a whole it must have been a boon to them; whenever I told people how much I paid for rent, and this was a question I was often asked, the matter being as “public” as one’s salary, they were “scandalized” by how much it was, telling me that I was being cheated. How true this was I often wondered (Were people just envious or did they have some other motivation for their reaction?), but in any event the rent added to the Niculescus’ household income. None of this is to say that the Niculescus’ material situation was

comfortable. Not only was Daciana stressed about the future prospects of her job, but her father also often complained that his pension was too small and that this was the reason he had returned to work. Still, they were somewhat better off than many people I came to know, which allowed them to hold such an enormous *pomană* feast. It was so “big” that it even seemed to me that it gave the Niculescus an opportunity to show their wealth to others, a possibility compounded by the fact that the *pomană* was held for someone they were not ritually obligated to honor. Recall that there is a specific calendar for giving *pomană* to people; although it was acceptable to hold the event, it was hardly a ritual requirement.

For most people I met, *pomeni* could not be “given” with the same splendor as the Niculescus did on this occasion; on the contrary, it was sometimes a source of significant stress because people knew the ritual importance of giving *pomană* on behalf of someone, but they had limited means to fulfill their obligation. This included people who decided to carry out their duty to give *pomană* in a somewhat less costly way than the Niculescus, namely by putting together packets of food to distribute rather than holding a feast. One of my most intimate insights into the expense this incurred came from the Iorgas; even if they were, like the Niculescus, in a somewhat more comfortable position than some other informants, the experience was telling. Constanța’s father died shortly after my first departure from Galați in early 2005. Not long after I returned a few months later, she invited me to participate in a *pomană* ceremony her family was holding because three months had passed since his death. As the Niculescus had done, Constanța made a *colivă*, upon which she designed a cross in red jellied candy because it was less than forty days since Easter, and a *cozonac*, but she also boiled several eggs, dyeing them red, and

filled at least a dozen small packets each with a tomato, a cucumber and a cheese sandwich. After Constanța, her older brother and I took these items to a nearby Orthodox church, where a priest performed a rite in which he asked God to have pity and compassion on their father, we distributed some of the packets to people working at the church. From there we moved to another Orthodox church to continue handing out the packets to people waiting in the vicinity, Constanța calling them “poor people.” After handing out all the packets, we took some *colivă*, a few eggs and part of the *cozonac* to their aunt and cousin, who lived nearby, along the way stopping to purchase pastries for them.

The Iorgas’ three-month *pomană* offered a close-up example of the practice of honoring this ritual by assembling packets and distributing them to others. Although the Iorgas were somewhat less pressed with their finances than others I came to know, the *pomană* was nevertheless a window onto the expense one could meet for such a ceremony. It was no surprise that other, especially marginalized informants mentioned being worried about the cost of fulfilling their duty to a dead relative. This included Nicoleta Apostol, who nevertheless said she would give *pomană* on the name day of her long-deceased husband by making a *colivă* mostly out of seasonal fruits such as apples, but, curiously, she also said she would use banana, which was expensive, and by offering homemade wine. Others came close to “deciding” to not honor their *pomană* obligation because they did not have the resources even to assemble modest packets of food or to make a *colivă*. This included Rodica Dragomir, who said she was dismayed that she almost had to forgo honoring her deceased husband on an important holiday until her children stepped in to assist her.

It was not only death rituals that could be a source of stress to pensioners. Weddings could be even more expensive, so much so that many pensioners I knew simply did not attend them or only joined in church services. Those who were socially obligated to participate fully often struggled to pay for the costs involved. The reason for this was that wedding guests were required to pay a stipulated amount of money – called a “gift” (*dar*) – in order to attend the parties. That is, one learned ahead of a wedding how much attending the reception would be and then brought this money to the event and gave it to the bride and groom. The amount varied according to the status of the couple marrying, the location of the reception and other factors, but in 2004 it was certain that in most cases one would be expected to pay at least one million lei (or about \$30), though typically much more than this would be requested. This gift defrayed the cost of the food served at the reception, and what was left over went for the new couple’s personal use. But the expense of a wedding did not necessarily end here. People with particularly close relationships with the bride and groom were expected to give even more money; in some cases their generosity was made known to everyone attending by the band leader or some other person calling out the amount they gave, making it all the more important that they gave “enough.” And if one were even more personally involved in a marriage ceremony, the expenditure was yet higher. The best man and the maid of honor were expected to pay for the church service as well as the wedding bouquet, the bride’s tiara and veil and two large candles that they held during the ceremony; the groom bought the bride’s wedding dress and the bride’s family bought gifts (typically clothing) for the groom’s family members (his parents and any siblings), the best man and the maid of honor.

What all of this meant was that a wedding could be a near-prohibitive outlay for anyone living on a limited income.

That the money required to attend a wedding reception was enough to keep people away was evident in one experience I had. In spring 2004, I was invited to the wedding of the daughter of a Foundation employee, being told that the reception would cost me 1.5 million lei (or about \$44) to attend. I accepted the invitation and on the planned day went first to the church ceremony. I found there a number of pensioners I had come to know at the Foundation, greeting several of them outside the church after the event. Most of them announced that that would be it for them because they had no possibility to pay for the reception – for most of them the cost was equivalent to more than a month's income. It was hard enough for them to purchase the required flowers for attending the church ceremony; they absolutely could not afford any more.

The pensioners who could not fully attend the Foundation wedding could almost be viewed as “lucky,” though. For some people, full participation in a wedding was obligatory, which placed pressure on them to come up with the money to partake in the event. This was the experience for Laura Marinescu, a retired accountant I met at the Foundation, where she briefly worked. Running into Laura one day on a walk home from the Foundation, I told her I had just gone to the wedding. Interested in knowing the cost, she directly asked me how much I had paid for the reception. Telling her the amount, she then let me know that she would soon face a similar expense for a wedding she had to attend. It was a burden to her, Laura said, adding that “we don't attend weddings out of pleasure” because of the struggle to pull the money together for them.

Experiencing apprehension over ceremonial obligations was not entirely new to the post-socialist period. Some people described facing difficulty meeting such obligations under socialism, especially in the 1980s. To no surprise, the difference between the two periods is that under socialism the main problem people confronted was obtaining goods needed for a ceremony in the all-too-scarcely provisioned market while today the biggest challenge is paying for an event on a tight budget. Neither is an easy challenge, but conversations I had with people about holding ceremonies under socialism, even in the 1980s, suggest that it was relatively easier then to meet one's obligations than it is today, given the vast network of personal connections they, and others, could tap into in the past. For example, Constanța Iorga said that in the 1980s, a time when her brother was married, people would manage to pull off events by gathering together bread rations from kin and friends and pulling strings in the informal market to get other goods. Today it is generally the lack of personal finances, and the absence of people to help one out, that disrupts the normal flow of life cycle ceremonies.

“I call it ‘Deception Day’”:
the stress of bureaucratic uncertainties

One day in June 2004, I went to the Foundation to meet with a woman who had been recently hired as the new director of the organization. When I arrived she was occupied, so I sat alone in the hall where pensioners gathered each month to obtain the food packets. While I was waiting, an older man walked in, sat down next to me and asked me a question about the monastery trip the Foundation was sponsoring that July. I did not know the answer to his question but anyway continued our conversation by identifying myself to him. Learning about my purpose for being in Romania, he got to

his feet, saying that I needed to hear about an experience he was having. Despite having worked at *Sidex* in a position that was equivalent to those held by several of his colleagues, he said he was earning a pension one-quarter the amount of theirs. Bewildered and upset by this, he had turned to a former supervisor to complain, only to have his frustration aggravated by the man's dismissing his concern and telling him he received a salary that was already good enough. His emotions obviously very raw from the perceived injustice, as we spoke his voice grew louder and his breathing became shallow. There was little I could do but offer the man sympathy, agreeing with him that a miscalculation appeared to have occurred, but the encounter left a strong impression of yet another source of stress to pensioners in Galați that deserves attention in this chapter, modifications to laws in the post-socialist period that left the pension system in a state of some disarray.

The changes to the pension system, which affected many more people than just the man I encountered on that June day, were explained to me by an administrator at the Department of Pensions and Other Social Insurance Benefits in Galați. She pointed out that inequities such as the one he described were present because laws had been passed since 1989 affecting only certain segments of the retired population. One example was Law 19 of April 1, 2001, which provided certain benefits only to people who retired after the law became effective. The inequalities in income created by this law were significant enough and of such political resonance that in October 2004 the social democratic government began a process of “recalculating pensions” (*recalcularea pensiilor*) in order to wipe out the differences. The process was very slow, however, because it involved many cases and there were too few people trained, at least at the outset, to complete it.

By March 2005 only pensions which had gone into effect prior to 1980 had undergone “recalculation” (N.A. 2005b:2). Although the increases people anticipated as a result of the change were generally modest, they were nevertheless very important to them. For example, Nicușor Iordache, a retired equipment repairman, said that he eagerly awaited the extra income because it had become quite difficult supporting his family on his current pension. He explained that his wife had never been employed outside the home and that they had a daughter who was more than forty years old and was mentally disabled. Although her disability was not severe, he said that it was bad enough to keep her from being able to hold a job. Making matters worse, the state recently withdrew financial support for her disability, on what grounds was unclear but the change appeared to coincide with reductions in public assistance characteristic of the period.

Not everyone who “benefited” from Law 19 was pleased. Dumitru Ungureanu, who had retired not long before we first met in 2004, labeled the day it was passed “Deception Day” (“*Ziuă Păcălelii*”). He argued that the law had actually exacerbated, rather than redressed, inequities in the retirement system. Dumitru supported his argument with reference to pension increases that became effective on September 1, 2004, pointing out that people like him who had retired after the law’s passage received an increase of only 4%, while those who retired before Law 19 went into effect were offered an increase of 9.3%. This perceived injustice, which I later learned from the pension administrator was inaccurate, bothered Dumitru significantly. In describing the problem to me, he said that “life is very stressful because this entire country doesn’t operate as it should,” a fact which to him was especially evident in “stupid laws,” the consequences of which personally affected him.

Other informants expressed anger and disgust over further legislative changes that affected their pension income. This included Raluca Barbu, who spoke of the “consuming theft” (“*mâncătorie*”) of a new law that stripped her of part of the benefits she had expected following years working in a toxic environment. Originally told that nine years would be added to the base figure with which the state calculated her pension, she suddenly learned a new law took effect that reduced the extra years she received to seven. Visibly upset by the matter, she said that it was an obvious case of “fraud” (“*înșelătorie*”).

“It Keeps You Awake at Night”: Stress and Public Health

This chapter has so far examined the material and social stressors, most of them entirely new to the post-socialist era, that working-class pensioners in Galați described chronically experiencing. There is, however, another dimension to this story about stress in post-1989 Romania – the public health implications of the “stress epidemic.” In this section, I briefly explore these from the perspectives of both my informants and researchers in the health sciences. I emphasize in the discussion that, with post-socialism, there has been a substantive shift among people in Romania from attributing health problems to rather specific, “local” causes to attributing them to generalized, multifaceted stress. This etiological reframing of health and illness is supported by medical research, which is increasingly concluding that stress plays a role in human maladies.

One of the first people I met at the Pensioners’ Foundation was Sorina Leonte, a woman in her early sixties who had retired from a thirty-five year career as an

accountant, earning a monthly pension of more than three million lei (approximately \$100). Although her income was considerably higher than that of many others I would come to know, placing Sorina like a few other informants presented here in the upper echelons of the educated working class, she nevertheless described experiencing persistent difficulty managing her household budget, protesting in particular about the high cost of household utilities. She was also bothered by taxes that ate at her income. One of her responses to this problem was to continue working as an accountant after she retired, a “strategy” for making ends meet I return to in chapter six.

A few months after I met Sorina, she was hospitalized for respiratory problems. Discussing the experience following her recovery, I asked Sorina why she believed she had become ill. As was the case with so many people already described here, Sorina pointed to “stress” to explain her health crisis. “[It’s because of] the stressful situations in which we all live,” she said, elaborating on this general comment in the following way:

I have lived through a difficult period. I have suffered stress, physical effort, intellectual effort so that I could keep up with all the demands that my supervisors and society in general have imposed upon me.

Attributing the stress to a reduction in her, and in other people’s, “immunity,” she went on:

Our immunity has collapsed and at any stirring of the wind¹⁷ we are finished, knocked down like feeble children who have just been born.

There is much to think about from this brief interaction with Sorina. Especially relevant to the discussion here is her opinion that both the causes and the effects of stress

¹⁷ Sorina’s reference to the wind suggests the persistence of other “folk” beliefs about the causes of illness. People in Romania have long attributed health conditions to drafts (*curente*), a belief observed also in other cultural and historical contexts (see, e.g., Simmons 1969).

in the post-socialist period could be quite “general.” Yes, specific demands from her supervisors had created stress for her and she ascribed her respiratory illness to the stress, but she also believed that rather universal conditions were making her, and others, ill – in other words, generalized stress was having a systemic impact on everyone, lowering people’s basic “immunity.”

This same “generalizing” about stress characterized conversations I had with Dumitru Ungureanu. At one point he let me know that he had been hospitalized five times in 1998 with an illness that health professionals could not diagnose. Telling me that his entire body ached during the episodes, he said he was certain the obscure illness was the result of “stress” because it had the power to make “the human organism react negatively.” When I asked him what had caused him to experience so much stress that year, he said that it was the result of “injustices” in society, adding to this that his marriage had fallen apart that year and that he had been experiencing intolerable on-the-job pressure.

Not every pensioner made such “general” statements about either the causes or effects of stress. As I have already shown, both Alexandra Câmpeanu and Mihaela Florescu, the neighbors, attributed very specific illnesses to stress even as they explained the broad array of circumstances leading them to feel stressed. Such interpretations about the impact of stress on human health did not detract from the larger picture of stress as a problem that was flowing from a wide range of new sources and was making people suffer in incalculably different ways. In another telling example, Claudiu Ene, another working-class pensioner I met, latched on to “stress” to describe what he believed was a widespread problem with sleeplessness in Galați. It was an especially meaningful

contribution to a conversation I was having with his wife and daughter during a visit to their home because Claudiu was normally an extremely taciturn person. When the topic of stress came up in a discussion about work instability in the post-socialist era, Claudiu very uncharacteristically forcefully joined the conversation. He agreed with his daughter's analysis that stress was brought on by job insecurity, adding that it was a major cause of the insomnia many people were suffering – "it keeps you awake at night," he emphasized, a new problem facing people in a transformed Romania.

These ethnographic vignettes teach that the problem of stress is becoming central to folk beliefs about disease etiology in post-socialist Romania. Indeed, since 1989 people have singled out stress as a key factor in human ailments. In other words, interpretations of illness focusing on stress have blossomed in lockstep with Romania's political, economic and social transformation in the post-socialist period. Of course, further research is needed to determine whether people believe stress causes some illness more than others, but for the time being it appears that they ascribe many different health problems to a range of stressors that are new. This "generality" of the impact and of the causes of stress makes sense given the broad-scale nature of the rupture to society that has occurred since 1989.

The conclusion here that the problem of stress is becoming central to beliefs about the etiology of health conditions in Romania contributes to a growing body of research that explores the role stress plays in human morbidity and mortality. As I have noted earlier, the connection between stress and public health has been made in a number of ethnographic studies involving minority groups in the U.S. There are other examples of

research on this connection, including the role of stress in the onset of diabetes (Schoenberg et al. 2005) and chronic asthma (Pohlman and Becker 2006).

Numerous recent studies in the medical sciences arrive at the same conclusion about stress or hypothesize a probable connection between stress and a variety of health conditions. This includes a study on “wound healing,” which concludes that both chronic and acute stress among long-term caregivers and students preparing for examinations slows the healing of wounds because of the natural release of glucocorticoids, compounds generated in the adrenal gland that can suppress the immune system (Christian et al. 2006). Studies of cancer-related fatigue (CRF), a condition common to people diagnosed with cancer, which many continue to suffer even long after remission, also appears to be aggravated by “emotional distress” and “anxiety” (Mustian et al. 2007).¹⁸ Research on stress among breast cancer survivors, albeit inconclusive, suggests as well that women who experience “stressful life events” may be more likely to suffer the reappearance of breast cancer tumors than those who experience relatively few such experiences in their lives (Palesh et al. 2007). A study in Hungary of work-related stress concludes that people’s physical and mental health is negatively influenced by stressful conditions they experience at their workplaces (Kopp et al. 2007). Finally, a number of studies on cardiovascular disease, HIV progression and depression argue that stress appears to play a leading role in these health conditions (Cohen et al. 2007).

¹⁸ CRF remains, however, poorly understood. It was officially recognized only in 1998, and its etiology appears multifactorial (Mustian et al., op. cit.:54).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the “epidemic of stress” among working-class pensioners in Galați. I have focused in particular on the many causes behind this “epidemic,” which I maintain are coincident with and aspects of the post-socialist period. These stressors show us the breadth of the transformation that has occurred since 1989, with once certain economic and social conditions having been all but completely upturned. We have observed pensioners in the post-socialist era struggling to pay for food, household utilities and medications. We have also seen them torn apart from their kin because of the lack of jobs in Romania, newly fearful of crime and incapable of properly honoring deceased family members. I have emphasized that the impact of these changes has been especially severe among the people documented in this dissertation – poor Moldovan pensioners who lived most of their lives under socialism. This chapter has done more than explore the causes of stress among pensioners, however. It has also touched on some of the perceived effects of this “epidemic” from the perspective of older men and women. I asserted that the “generality” of the impact that people attribute to stress – a concept which I noted is itself relatively “universal” – marks a change from the socialist period, when more local, specific explanations for illness prevailed. This “generality” returns us to the central problem of this dissertation, that a broad-scale rupture of so much that was familiar has occurred since 1989 as Romania has transformed into a neoliberal capitalist country.

But this story of stress is not over yet. In the next chapter I describe in more detail the stress that is caused from encounters with the healthcare system. Within that context I explore the commentary on moral decline that is partly linked to such

encounters. In it we discover a curious ambivalence among pensioners and many of their kin regarding “corrupt” behavior that, in the end, negatively affects their lives. We see how, and why, pensioners distinguish between the “corruption” they encounter in the healthcare system and the true corruption that exists in other spheres.

Chapter Five

“It’s Better to Be Poor and Clean”: Moral Discourse in the Post-Socialist Era

Introduction

Cosmin Iorga, Constanța’s father, was in his eighties when we met, and he suffered from numerous health problems. On several occasions during his retirement, they required surgery and lengthy hospital stays. Constanța and her mother Elena described these experiences, saying, among other things, that they needed to pay out-of-pocket for Cosmin’s treatment in spite of the fact that healthcare services in the public system were meant to still be free in Romania, as had been the case under socialism. I had expected to hear about such payments even before I came to Galați – as I noted in the introduction it was one of the problems I had intended to explore in my research – but what I did not foresee was the ambivalence Constanța and Elena experienced concerning these payments, especially given the stress they brought on. Neither was wholly accepting of the practice, indeed in some cases they were quite bothered by it, but at the same time they were rather forgiving of healthcare professionals for making the requests, offering many reasons for this sentiment.

This chapter begins by exploring the moral ambivalence toward out-of-pocket payments for healthcare services that not only Constanța and Elena expressed but that many other people also felt. I explain why such ambivalence prevailed toward a practice that was without doubt a major stressor, if not the most severe stressor at least for pensioners. In this discussion, I note that the characteristically tolerant attitude toward doctors was akin to the feelings some pensioners conveyed about their children, who they knew in most cases attempted to lend them support but who were just as squeezed as their

parents by no-frills budgets. The chapter continues by contrasting these attitudes with the condemnation with which most of my informants of all ages viewed the new class of elites who had grown rich and powerful in the post-socialist period. I point out that it is these people, rather than the doctors, whom pensioners view as “corrupt” (*corupți*) since frequently the doctors had been a part of people’s lives for many decades and their own struggle to make ends meet was well-known. Helping this sentiment come to fruition was a public discourse on “corruption” (*corupție*) that was present during my fieldwork, the scope of which I describe, including discussion of the role “talk of corruption” played in the 2004 election. This topic reemerges in chapter seven, where I deal with the impact of such political rhetoric on the election outcome. I conclude the chapter by examining how pensioners talked about themselves in contrast to the corrupt, pointing out the meaningful opposition they drew between themselves as “poor and clean” and the elite as “rich and dirty.” Within this context, I discuss the certainty with which they believed their impoverishment in the post-socialist era was structural and therefore not something about which to feel ashamed.

“How Do You Open the Door to a Doctor’s Office?”:
The Problem of “Gift-Giving” to Healthcare Professionals

There did, indeed, seem to be good reason for the Iorgas to be bothered by the need to pay doctors for treatments Cosmin had to undergo. They described two experiences that were quite disconcerting to them. The first occurred when Cosmin needed surgery to remove gallstones.¹ Constanța described going with her brother to consult a physician about the surgery. Saying that the surgeon told them “you know

¹ I have made changes to the conditions for which the people described in this section sought out treatment in order to protect the identities of the patients and caregivers.

what you need to do,’” and that the operation would anyway “‘cost less than a funeral,’” she described how the family gathered together what money they could, three million lei (or about \$90), hoping that it would be enough to give him access to the operating room. Constanța said that she was so bothered by the need to forfeit hard-earned money that when they returned to the surgeon’s office to give it to him and to make the final arrangements for Cosmin’s admission to the hospital she engaged in an audacious act. Taking the money out of an envelope, she spread it on the doctor’s desk, hoping this would make him feel a degree of shame for making the request. It did not work, however; the doctor calmly scooped up the bills and placed them in his shirt pocket so that anyone could see them. They believed that he did this in order to prove his worth to others in the hospital.

The other experience took place, or so Constanța reported, when Cosmin developed a high temperature and needed to be taken to the hospital. Advised by a physician to obtain penicillin and hypodermic needles so that he could be treated over a 24 hour period, Constanța went to a nearby pharmacy to purchase the items.² When she returned to the hospital, she gave the penicillin and the needles to the nurse, assuming that the drug would be administered as the doctor had advised. But the following morning when she came back to the hospital, to her dismay she found the penicillin and the syringes lying unused on a table next to Cosmin’s bed. It occurred to her then that she had failed to pay the nurse to administer the drug.

² Medical supplies were limited at many hospitals, a condition which required people to purchase many supplies needed in their own care in non-emergency situations, as noted above. The Ministry of Health was so deeply indebted to the Association of Medical Supply Distributors (*Asociația Furnizorilor Produsele Medicale – AFPM*) – 1.8 trillion lei (\$55 million) in December 2004 – that at one point in May 2005 the *AFPM* temporarily suspended the distribution of medical supplies until the government honored its contract to the supplier.

As I have noted, the second story did not seem true to me. I say this in part because the liability a healthcare worker with relatively low status would face for failing to carry out what was a relatively unburdensome task to me seemed too great a risk to lead to such negligence. I was doubtful about its veracity moreover because I had heard the same “story” of drugs not being administered from a couple of other people, including Adrian Tomescu as I describe below, which suggested it was a “legend” akin to some of those I had heard about crime. Another such apparent “legend” I occasionally came across involved a woman from the countryside arriving penniless and in labor at the hospital birthing ward, only to be ignored by the attending physicians because she could not pay for their services. These possible legends and rumors, again like the stories about crime, were not made up to entertain me; instead, they were a reflection of the degree to which paying for healthcare services had propagated.

In spite of having these stressful experiences, or being anxious about their possibility, it was intriguing to learn that neither Elena nor Constanța blamed healthcare professionals for expecting, or outright asking for, such payments. One of the main reasons for this was their belief that physicians’ salaries were too low. Pointing out that experienced doctors on average made seven million lei (about \$220) a month, they said that this neither compensated them for the years of study they had completed nor did it seem fair because the amount was far less than what some workers at *Sidex* received. Making matters worse in their opinion was the fact that the seven million lei salary only belonged to experienced physicians, most other healthcare workers making far less. Such poor salaries, according to Elena, were in the end to everyone’s detriment since they meant that doctors did not have money to spend on their professional development.

This did not mean that Elena and Constanța cheered on doctors making such requests, as we have already seen in Constanța surprisingly bold act to shame her father's surgeon. They were indeed quite troubled especially by the tendency among many healthcare workers to put everyone into the same "pot" ("*oala*") when asking them for payments. Given the inequality that had mushroomed since 1989, they believed that doctors needed to discriminate between the well-to-do and the less well-off when arranging such payments for service. Still, it was telling that they dismissed suggestions that medical professionals were extorting payments to enrich themselves; even if they did observe doctors doing this, it seemed to me that the Iorgas would have largely accepted this because they felt the services doctors rendered were so vital.

Another person who was stressed by such payments yet conveyed an ambivalent attitude toward them was Nicoleta Apostol. She was rather general in her criticism about the payments, telling me that, while this practice had existed under socialism, it had become much more widespread in the post-socialist era. She, like many others, believed that this resulted from the disappearance of the once-vigilant eyes of the *Securitate*. Relatively fearless today of the repercussions of such payment requests, healthcare professionals largely felt free to make any stipulation for their services and, if one could not meet their demands, one either would have to forgo treatment or would not be treated as well as paying patients would. For example, doctors increasingly required cash payments for treatment rather than cigarettes or food, items which were customary during socialism. This did not mean that people had entirely stopped giving material goods for healthcare services, a few examples of which I give below, but, as Nicoleta and many others observed, a change has occurred such that today giving cash is more common.

This change is a strain on people because of the relative limitlessness it has introduced into such exchanges between patients and caregivers; unlike under socialism when the sheer materiality of the goods that patients gave kept the size of such exchanges to a limit, today the demand for cash has loosened the barrier on how much one can be expected to give (Gerald Creed 2005: personal communication) – this, all the more, is a reason for people to feel stress when they need medical attention. Not surprisingly, some informants reported putting off treatment because they could not pay.

In spite of these facts, Nicoleta referred to the practice as “giving a gift” (“*dăruște*”), and she used the noun *dar*, meaning gift, to refer to the item one gave. Captivated by her using these words, I told her that it was the word *șpaga*, an informal word for bribe, that many others customarily used. Her response was that the word *dar* was much “nicer” than the word *șpaga*. While at the time I did not question her any further about the word, her response to my comment was altogether quite puzzling: why did she feel compelled to use a “nice” word to refer to payments that she thought were wrong and that caused her, and others, stress? It seemed at first that it may have resulted simply from the word *șpaga* being a very informal word; perhaps, I wondered, she had felt it was inappropriate to use slang in discussing the matter. If that were the case, she could, however, have used other, more formal words for bribe, such as *mita*, a very formal word for bribery that tends to get used in describing very high-level corruption, or other words, but she did not do this.

Nicoleta’s use of the word gift revealed, as with the Iorgas, how ambivalent she felt about such gift-like payments. In Nicoleta’s case, this outlook on the matter surfaced at least partly from a personal encounter she had had with a doctor. She described her

husband suffering from a major seizure at some point in the early 1980s. In order to decide the best care for him, she obtained the opinions of a couple of doctors. One of them was quite direct with her, saying that her husband's condition was terminal and that it probably would be best if he returned home and had her look after him rather than if he underwent further treatment, which the doctor said might anyway cause him to die even sooner. She followed his advice and for about a year took care of her husband at home, which was a difficult experience but still gave her time with him that she said would have been robbed of her if the doctor had not been so direct about his prognosis. This quite personal encounter with a doctor explained well why she chose the word gift to refer to the item one gave to a medical professional even if at the same time she experienced stress from the need to give such gifts and complained about the growing inequality in access to healthcare treatment.

I did not have to go far to hear similarly ambivalent sentiments from others; Nicoleta's son Costică, too, had mixed emotions about such "gift-giving." In this case, I was even more surprised by the attitude, though, because of some of Costică's experiences with the healthcare system and because he was, more than perhaps many others, critical of health professionals for their personal enrichment in the post-socialist era.

Costică's experiences included both the recommended surgery for an ulcer that he decided against partly because he was told that it would cost 3.5 million lei (about \$110), or nearly a month's salary, and the physical his employer required him to get, which cost him both a million lei (about \$30) and a bar of chocolate. His criticism of healthcare professionals for these payments flowed from observations of their purchasing villas

from the payments they took from patients. He estimated this level of enrichment was based on the number of patients they saw in a single day and the amount of money they requested, or expected, from them. In the same breath, Costică said that the “gifting” practice was a direct result of the low official salaries healthcare workers received. As a result, he did not in the end believe they were on morally questionable ground; if anything, to a degree he blamed the public for the “gifting,” saying that it was “the result of their error” (“*din greșeala oamenilor*”) and their “stupidity” (“*prostie*”) that the practice had come about in the first place. Only when I explicitly asked him whether it was a variety of “corruption” did he, however, more fully back down from his position that at least some doctors were personally benefiting from the practice, instead arguing that the problem was structural. Using an idiom that predates the revolution he said “the fish rots from the head” (“*peștele se împute de la cap*”). By this he meant that the problem of “gifting” to healthcare workers was ultimately the result of corrupt behavior at higher levels in society; that is, he was implying that corruption among rich and powerful elites created the conditions, such as a financially-strapped healthcare system, for the proliferation of out-of-pocket payments in the post-socialist period. For this reason, in Costică’s opinion one could not blame healthcare workers, even if some of them were getting quite wealthy and people like Costică were cut out of services, because they were not truly responsible for the problem.

There were other young informants who maintained an equivocal attitude toward the gratuities. They included a man in his twenties, Ion Cristea, whom I met by way of his grandfather and with whom I had only sporadic contact on account of his very unstable work life, Ion being unemployed during most of the time I knew him, probably

eventually leaving Romania for work abroad since he had often talked about doing this and after my 2005 visit I lost contact with him. Prefacing our discussion by saying that giving gratuities to doctors was a “real fact,” words he said in English, the language we always used together, Ion then gave me examples of three experiences he and his family had had with such payments. The first involved his mother, who had died a few years earlier from breast cancer, a condition Ion attributed to the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986.³ Her treatment had been costly; Ion recollected that his father gave money and a large amount of cheese to a doctor so that she could undergo her therapy. Ion’s father began having serious health problems while I was in the field. Although I never learned the nature of his condition, Ion did tell me that his treatment had cost him three million lei (about \$90) to begin. Ion himself encountered the expectation to pay a gratuity when he had stitches removed from a minor wound. Saying he could tell the nurse “wanted something” after she had taken the stitches out, Ion said he refused to give her anything because the procedure had been so simple and had taken so little time. This minor experience notwithstanding, Ion made clear that in most cases one had to “pay to be saved,” a point he confirmed by telling me a joke he said was popular: “How do you open the door to a doctor’s office?” he asked me. “With your hand,” I replied. “No,” he said, “with your foot because your hands are filled with all the things you will give.” This “real fact” of having to pay gratuities to be “saved” did not lead Ion to denounce all medical professionals even if such a response would have been understandable given the personal anguish through which I knew he had gone because of his mother’s death. While he disliked that such “gifting” was necessary and he believed like so many others

³ This was the only time anyone ever attributed a health problem to the pollution from this disaster. The Chernobyl plant lies approximately 500 km. (300 mi.) north of Galați.

that some people were growing wealthy from it, he concluded that it was a structural problem that could be eliminated only by raising the salaries of healthcare professionals and by wiping out the high-level corruption that had led to revenue being, in his word, “stolen” from the healthcare system.

Another young informant who expressed a nuanced attitude about giving gratuities was Margareta Popa, a woman I was introduced to by a relative of hers who came to the Foundation. Margareta had a child while I was in the field. Like many other people who had been treated for other conditions, she described giving money to everyone who provided a service to her, including the doctor, the anesthesiologist, the physician’s assistant, the nurse and the custodial staff – in total she paid around eleven million lei (about \$340) to have the child. Unnerved by the cost, Margareta believed she could just as well have gone to a private clinic in Bucharest. The cost would have been equivalent, the service would have been better and the conditions at the facility would have been more hygienic, she claimed. She was demoralized by the fact that for long she had contributed financing to the healthcare system with monthly payments from her salary, money that was just evaporating into thin air. “It is corruption,” she pointed out, but healthcare workers were not to blame for it. Instead, she felt like so many others, that their salaries needed to be raised even if “some” of them did indeed make fortunes from the gratuities; the majority did not, she said.

A few people were not exactly of two minds about the gratuities. This included Victoria, who, unlike others, never overtly wavered between being critical of some healthcare workers and justifying their reasons for “requesting” such payments. To her the gratuities were simply an unfortunate necessity for gaining access to the healthcare

system. This did not mean that Victoria did not attempt to test the limits of the practice, suggesting that she did not entirely agree with it and indicating that she was very burdened financially by it. This was revealed during my stay with her family in 2005.

Victoria suffered from rheumatism, which she described making her “bones feel cold” and causing her to fluctuate between sweating and experiencing chills. For the problem she received ten days of physical therapy annually from the state, her time for treatment coming up while I was staying in her home. The therapy was officially free-of-charge, and Victoria clearly hoped to keep it that way when she went in for her first day’s treatment that June. This seemed very unlikely however. Already at the outset, a physician leafing through her file commented that Victoria did not qualify for rehabilitation because she had been there less than a year earlier. Victoria at first objected, telling the physician that she must have been confusing her with someone else, but this was of no use. The physician responded by saying that in any event it would be better for Victoria to go to a spa, an option Victoria knew was not possible for her because of the cost involved and because the spas were too far from her home. At this point in the conversation Victoria feared she would jeopardize her chances for therapy if she continued to challenge the physician or that at best she would be looked at for just a few minutes and then be sent on her way. She therefore relented by silently placing an envelope filled with money, the necessary “*ciubuc*” (another slang word for bribe) as she called it, on the physician’s desk. This did the trick – Victoria was welcomed to her therapy.⁴ “The interest shows the fez” (“*interesul vede fesul*”), Victoria proclaimed, an idiom meaning “money makes the world go ‘round.’”

⁴ Victoria changed her account of this experience immediately after describing it this way. She said that the doctor snatched the envelope from her desk after Victoria placed it there and dismissively told her to go to

Victoria's "giving" for the treatment did not end with this payment. She described subsequently purchasing ice cream, candy and pastries for the therapists that cost her the equivalent of a few dollars. Although she felt it was a good idea to do this on each day of her treatment, toward the end of it she ran out of money. "That's it," she announced, "now I'll be going there empty-handed." This made her feel some doubt about being able to finish the therapy, but by then she had cultivated friendly relationships with the therapists, which allowed her to continue going to the center. On the one hand, then, Victoria was "victorious," giving the right mix of cash and symbolically meaningful "gifts" to receive the therapy, a process without a doubt helped along by her charming personality, and she seemed proud of her ability to "finesse" the system. On the other hand, she was not finessing the system at all; the gifts were draining her of much-needed cash, and the experience therefore added to her stress.

Worse still, Victoria was not always nearly as successful at managing the distribution of "*ciubuc*" with others as she was with the physician and therapists at the physical therapy center. For example, once she attempted to obtain a compensated prescription from her family doctor with a packet of coffee, but it did not work out. She seemed to blame the failure of her attempt on a prior patient. The person had given flowers for a consultation with the doctor. This gift was unsatisfactory, the doctor stating loudly enough for people in the waiting room to hear after the patient had left: "'What do people think? I eat flowers!'" In the end, Victoria felt that even if this had not happened, she still would not have gotten the prescription with the coffee. No, she said, ordinary

a spa. Only when Victoria told her that her income was very low and she relied on the Foundation for food did the physician welcome her to the therapy. It was not clear to me why she changed the account, but I suspect she suddenly felt uneasy about having told me that she had paid a "bribe" for the treatment. I never learned the amount of money she gave but suspect it was a few hundred thousand lei (or between \$10 and 15.)

people did not get them because they were too precious; doctors gave the prescriptions to family and close friends. Thus, at times the gift-giving did not even work, all the more reason for it to create stress in many people's lives even if they were ambivalent about it or, like Victoria, never quite condemned it.

There were a few people who were much less forgiving of the "gifting," describing health professionals as being immoral in making such requests. Although I believe that in listening only to them one would gain a rather distorted perspective of the healthcare system and the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients, their stories were nonetheless indicative of the troubled state of the Romanian healthcare system similar to the one portrayed in the film "The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu" (*Moartea Domnului Lăzărescu*), which depicts a poor pensioner's struggle, to his death, to receive healthcare services (Puiu 2005). As with the experiences of that man, the handful of narratives I share next reveal little of the ambivalence that characterizes the above accounts probably as a result of the immense stress created by the encounters and the narrators' sense of entrapment.

These included the experiences of a woman with a pension of 1.2 million lei (about \$37) following a brief career as a nurse, illness having forced her to retire early. Her pension seemed to be her only income since her husband had died some years earlier. In her care was a young grandson despite the fact that his father was living in Galați, and it did not appear that she received much, if any, financial assistance from him in raising the boy. The implications of this could be significant, as when her grandson began to experience a quite serious toothache. At first she treated him with painkillers, but they were ineffective, so she decided to take him to a dentist. She did not, though, have

money for the treatment he needed, and it should be noted here that dental services have largely been privatized in Romania since 1989, there being only a handful of public dental services available now; thus, the dentist's response to her request for cost-free treatment was "legitimate." He refused to treat the boy, an experience she described in the following way: "He said directly to my face, I will never forget it, 'give me three thousand lei [about \$9] and I will remove the molar.'" She responded by saying again that she did not have the money, and was "desperate" (*disperată*) hoping that since he was a child the man would have "pity" (*milă*) on him because he probably had children too. To the woman's shock, the dentist did not budge. "He refused to even look at him," she said.

Equally distraught over their encounters with the healthcare system and similarly unforgiving of the "requests" made by medical professionals were the Tomescus. They shared details about many of their experiences, a few of which in particular help to explain their attitude. These included emergency surgery Adrian needed to remove gallstones not long after I met them. The experience began with Adrian being rushed in an ambulance to the county hospital, where he underwent a series of examinations. They showed that his gallbladder was filled with stones – more than twenty, Adrian showing them to me after he had returned home – and that his liver, in Adrian's words, was "completely hardened." As a result, he was taken in for emergency surgery. "Then they waited for me to pay them," Adrian said, having heard from other patients that the doctors would want two million lei (about \$60) for the procedure he had undergone. Lacking the money, there was, no way for him to make the payment, which had disturbing implications. According to Adrian the doctor refused to look at him when he

came into the ward following the operation, and the nurse glared at Felicia when Felicia told the woman that “other than saying thank-you, I have nothing else I can give.” This was after the nurse told her that Adrian’s operation had been very serious and that the doctor therefore “deserves something.”

This did not mean that Adrian was sent home or entirely ignored since he needed some follow-up care. There was a catheter draining fluid from his liver, and the bandage surrounding it periodically needed changing because it became soaked with blood and other bodily fluids. Still, each time he went to have it changed he said “they asked for 10,000 lei [about \$0.30]” but since he was unable to pay the money he said the nurses treated him roughly. Furthermore, when it came time for Adrian to be released from the hospital, he again felt he was mistreated, in this case disrespected in fact, because he had not paid up. The doctor came into his room, where there were other patients, one of whom like Adrian was being released that day. Pointing to the man, who Adrian said had paid a gratuity, the doctor told the nurse that the man, whose last name he used, could be released. Turning then to Adrian, he continued: “Oh, yes, and that one over there can be sent home too.” The entire experience confirmed Adrian’s belief that “you’re treated worse than an animal if you don’t have money.” He even believed that people who paid gratuities received more effective pharmaceuticals than those who did not. “It was lucky it was an emergency,” he said in conclusion. If his condition had been less urgent they would have said to him to “go home and come tomorrow with so much money and then we will operate on you.”

There were a number of other, “smaller” experiences the Tomescus reported. Felicia described once needing a urine analysis but being told by a lab technician that it

would take some months to complete. Hardly wanting to wait so long, she placed a packet of coffee on the technician's desk – the analysis was then immediately taken care of. Adrian underwent an x-ray of one of his kidneys at one point because he was experiencing pain; the results did not, however, reveal any calculi. Still, Adrian's pain persisted, so he returned for another examination not long thereafter. This time the test showed that he had a collection of stones in his kidney. Reflecting on the experience, he said he was certain that no stones showed up on the first examination because he had failed to pay the radiographer anything.

The Tomescus also catalogued the experiences of other people being wrongly treated, which they believed resulted from their failure to pay gratuities. For example, Adrian recounted a story similar to the one Constanța Iorga shared about the failure of nurses to give her father penicillin injections. He said that while he was hospitalized for the gallstones and liver operation, he shared his room with another pensioner who could not pay for his care either. This, according to Adrian, led to the man being left to languish untreated in his hospital bed even though a drug he had purchased at a pharmacy needed to be injected in him; because he could not pay, the vials just sat at his bedside. Adrian told another, even more vivid story quite some time later following another stay at the hospital. On this occasion, he said that he was kept awake for three nights by a Roma/Gypsy who lay in a nearby bed perpetually moaning. The reason for this was that the man could not pay for treatment and therefore was ignored. Only when he pleaded with a doctor that he would sell a horse in order to get the money for the operation did the man get the treatment he seemed to desperately need.

I was never sure if Adrian's description of the Roma/Gypsy man's encounter was accurate even if he did tell it to me in the same way on two different occasions. There, nevertheless, seemed to be ample reason for the Tomescus to maintain relatively unnuanced sentiments about their encounters with doctors and to call the "gifting" a clear case of "corruption." They had had many experiences with the healthcare system on account of Felicia's disability and Adrian's many health problems, and their income was too low to pay for both the services they needed and medications they were prescribed. At the same time, their staunchly unforgiving stance probably related to the general unhappiness in their personal lives. It was no surprise, therefore, when Adrian maintained like some other informants that many healthcare professionals were growing rich from the gratuities; he mentioned that they purchased homes and cars with the money they accumulated. Moreover, the Tomescus rather predictably disagreed with the protests and other organized actions of *Sanitas*, a nationwide union of healthcare workers, that were carried out repeatedly during my research in order to draw attention to low salaries, poor working conditions and the general lack of adequate financing for the healthcare system (see, e.g., Mototolea 2004b, N.A. 2004f, S.V. 2004); other people were more sympathetic with the protesters. And, like the Iorgas, they complained about the tendency for healthcare workers to demand the same payments from all patients regardless of their means, even if Felicia did tell one story about being excused from paying her doctor a gratuity that the doctor said she was gathering from other patients in order to purchase linoleum for her office. Unlike many other people, they did not view the gratuities from the perspective of the healthcare workers and consequently were unwilling to cut them any slack.

The Tomescus were not alone in their unswerving criticism. The young couple who complained about waiting in the emergency room for care, Grigore and Sanda Stănescu, expressed similar disdain for doctors and nurses because of personal experiences involving gratuities. These included a major operation that Grigore underwent on his knee because of a degenerative joint disease. He said that the procedure, which was necessary, was extremely expensive – 10 million lei (or about \$300). Fortunately, they were able to pull the money together from Grigore’s salary at *Sidex* and by deferring payments to their building association, but the cost was still a major sacrifice for them. If they had not made the payment, however, Grigore was certain that he would either have not been able to undergo the operation or that the procedure would have been done poorly. Sanda, too, had a number of health conditions, including back problems, for which she had undergone costly surgery. And, like the Tomescus, they told me stories from others about graft within the healthcare system. Some of these came from a family friend, who was a physician’s assistant. She told Grigore about an experience her mother had had having her appendix removed. The physician performing the operation allegedly asked the friend’s mother whether she wanted “a \$100, \$200 or \$300 operation.” The same friend furthermore described observing the poor recovery of a man from an operation for which he had failed to pay a gratuity, which she said had resulted in haphazard treatment.

These experiences left the Stănescus with quite bitter feelings toward the health professions. They believed that upwards of 95 percent of all healthcare workers were undeniably corrupt, using their knowledge and skills to make money for themselves beyond any acceptable limit. They seemed even more unforgiving than the Tomescus,

my conversations with the Stănescus on the matter leaving me rather astonished. In their case, I think this attitude largely flowed from the severity of their health problems at such young ages and the prices they had to pay for treatment. Otherwise, neither Grigore nor Sanda struck me as especially litigious persons.

These ethnographic insights into “gift-giving” for healthcare services teach us a great deal about life in post-socialist Galați. For one, we learn from them about yet another source of stress in the lives of working-class pensioners, as well as many younger working-class people. People are destabilized by the need to pay out-of-pocket for healthcare services, the cost of which, like prices at the market, seems to be constantly going up. This makes the encounters pensioners have with the healthcare system doubly troubling. Not only do they experience stress from the health problems for which they seek treatment but they also are stressed by the knowledge that some price will be attached to their treatment, and, however small the amount is, more often than not they will not be able to pay it. Indeed, they have reason to fear that they could be turned away if their condition is not an emergency or that they will be treated poorly because they cannot pay the “bill.” Even if these fears are not based on reality – that is, even if they do have contact with doctors and nurses who perform their job adequately, which far more often than not is probably the case – the anxiety that they may not get good treatment because they are a poor pensioner nevertheless makes the encounter stressful. More than the other stressors described in the previous chapter, it is perhaps this one that weighs most heavily on pensioners, given not only the costs it involves but also the long-term health implications it has.

Because of all the stress created by the gratuities, it is surprising at first glance that many pensioners hold an ambivalent attitude toward them rather than outright condemn them. Many of the reasons for this can be found in the vignettes I have presented. I have pointed out that pensioners are sympathetic with healthcare workers because of their generally low salaries, a condition of which the public is well aware in good part because of the demonstrations and strikes nurses and doctors carried out with such frequency while I was in the field and beyond. At least one of the protest marches, for instance, was televised, and a participant was filmed saying how regrettable she found her requests for 10,000 lei (about \$0.30) for some service, but at the same time how necessary they were, given her official income. Pensioners were sympathetic because they, too, are familiar with the experience of living on a limited income. Still, it was not only the material insecurity of doctors and nurses that led retirees to have a forgiving attitude toward them; there were other, “social” reasons for this sentiment. These included the awareness, as the Iorgas mentioned, that healthcare workers performed a vital human service.

Even more powerful than this, it seems to me, are the personal histories pensioners I met in Galați have with medical professionals, like the one described by Nicoleta. This is a legacy of the socialist years, when people were paired up with a “family doctor” in their neighborhood. This meant that the population had regular contact with doctors and nurses; they were people they knew and, in some cases, people with whom they had developed personal ties. Constanța Iorga, for example, said that her family doctor had known her since she was born. This helped to make people generally sympathetic of healthcare workers under socialism, a feeling that has tended to persist

into the post-socialist era even if some observe a few surgeons growing rich from the gratuities. More importantly than this, people were already familiar from the socialist era with the need to give gifts and even to ask their doctors to be godparents to their children, with the expectation that this would give them access to better medical services (Sampson 1983:76). Hence, what to an outsider may appear with certainty to be a form of corruption is not experienced that way by cultural insiders, a phenomenon that has been widely observed (Rivkin-Fish 2005, Schneider and Schneider 2005, Shore and Haller 2005, Werner 2000, Zerilli 2005).

Particularly relevant to the discussion here is the article by Rivkin-Fish, who examined informal exchanges within the Russian healthcare system following socialism. In contrast to the attitudes I encountered among my mostly working-class informants in Galați, Rivkin-Fish discovered a lack of ambivalence among women in Russia toward the practice. She highlights the case of a middle-class woman named “Valya,” pointing out that she unhesitantly expressed approval for payments she made to a doctor for gynecological services, believing that since she was doing reasonably well financially she should be paying for such care, especially given that doctors in Russia, like their Romanian counterparts, had low official salaries. In a way, this is similar to the sentiment I came across among some people in Galați; as I have shown, they, too, in many cases felt doctors were poorly compensated for performing a humanitarian service. What was lacking, however, among Rivkin-Fish’s informants is a recognition, like that expressed by the Iorgas, that not everyone should be placed in the same “pot” by doctors since some simply could not afford the expense – as I noted, it is in part as a result of this inequality that the negative “side” of Romanian pensioners’ evaluations of such payments

arises. Like most people I talked to in Galați, though, Rivkin-Fish's informants did not label healthcare workers as immoral; in fact, they actually believed that making informal exchanges with physicians was a moral act since they were certain that, were they to follow official channels in paying for services in the Russian system, their money would wind up in the hands of self-serving state bureaucrats.

Similar as well to the ethnography I have presented about working-class people in Galați is Rivkin-Fish's report that patients in Russia often combine cash payments with commodities; Valya, for instance, not only gave money for her treatment but also offered a "gift" (in her word) of vodka. Rivkin-Fish theorizes that such material goods are a means of expressing gratitude for the services doctors render, allowing the "transaction" between physician and patient to take on a deeper meaning than that which occurs when other commodities are exchanged between people. She adds that such goods also connote a sense of "obligation," seemingly among patients, but one could also see how such gift-giving can create feelings of obligation among health professionals (as Rivkin-Fish does later show in discussing a doctor's reaction to the efforts of a wealthy friend of an acquaintance to secure treatment by willingly paying anything the doctor requested). As has been documented in the literature, gifts have the power to "make dogs" of those to whom they are given (Shirley Lindenbaum 2008;personal communication), leaving them to feel obliged to the gift-giver. A good example of this appears in Victoria's story, her gifts of ice cream and pastries endearing the therapists to her for the duration of her treatment.

Another important difference between the Russian and the Romanian cases here is the method by which people gained access to health care. Rivkin-Fish emphasizes that

her informants arranged consultations with physicians through personal acquaintances. Indeed, they still paid money and gave gifts to such people but the interpersonal connections remained important to accessing care. Among my informants, this appeared to be the case very infrequently. I suspect that this stems from the fact that, although people in many cases had had lifelong contact with doctors and nurses, they did not necessarily have a web of personal contacts with such professionals that they could tap into to address their healthcare needs. I believe that this disparity between the cases is as well a result of the different class backgrounds between my informants and those of Rivkin-Fish. Recall, for instance, that Victoria complained that there was no way she would get a compensated prescription; they were for the kin and friends of doctors. What this means is that accessing health care is a different experience for people in the two places: lacking money and a network of connections, seeking out health services is characteristically stressful for pensioners in Galați, while this seems to be much less the case for Rivkin-Fish's informants. This explains why people in the Russian example hold positive attitudes toward the payments while pensioners, and their kin, in Galați are mostly ambivalent, if not outright hostile, toward them. Indeed, neither group flat out interprets the payments as "corruption" as one might easily anticipate, but they clearly do not feel the same about them.

There is another perspective one can take on this practice, namely that of the medical professionals themselves. As I have already noted, Rivkin-Fish does this in her research, which is based on fieldwork in maternity hospitals. Although I did have contact with family doctors during my time in Galați, I hardly developed relationships with them like those with the pensioners that would have allowed me credible access to their

feelings about bribery, gift-giving and informal exchanges. Thus, even though the topic did come up in an interview with a doctor, there was no indication that taking or demanding such payments was something she would ever do – and this surely belied a complex reality of exchange with her patients. Future research will determine whether, as among the medical professionals Rivkin-Fish describes, nuance prevails among physicians in Romania about such payments. Indeed, as already shown in the comment made by the nurse captured on television during the demonstration, many healthcare professionals greatly regret “asking” for such payments.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that the generally forgiving stance pensioners maintain toward doctors and nurses is comparable to the attitude most retirees have toward their children and other younger kin. As with the doctors and nurses, pensioners are aware of the material insecurities that make their children’s lives precarious, and they have passed through a long history with their children that has made most retirees sympathetic toward them. As a result, it is common to hear pensioners in Galați state that they understand how their children can only do so much for them because of the difficulties they face in their own lives. For example, Rodica Dragomir often said that her children could help her out only occasionally with food, or loans to purchase medications, because they were stressed about job insecurity and living expenses. In these ways – that is, in the sympathy toward doctors and toward children – the moral discourse that one encounters among pensioners in Galați is actually not so different from what one would have observed in the socialist era: pensioners were equally “forgiving” then of both. Note, however, that conditions in that era did not by any means set up either group for the sort of criticism that is possible in the post-socialist era, as

exemplified by the Tomescus' and the Stănescus' scathing commentary about doctors. The moral discourse that has surfaced concerning the rich and powerful is yet more dramatically new to the post-socialist era. It is to this talk of the "truly" corrupt that I now turn.

"Before We Didn't Have Such Depravity":
The Discourse of Corruption in Post-socialist Romania

I have already pointed out that one of the major changes from the socialist to the post-socialist periods has been the significant decline in job security. I have also explained that this loss of certainty about work has created tremendous stress across the generations, with many young and middle-aged people in Galați working for low wages and no benefits on the black market or leaving the city for other, more developed parts of Romania or foreign countries. Pensioners face the very real possibility that they will spend their retirement without their children or other kin at their side because they have left the city or because they are too burdened with their own economic marginality to provide support to their elders. What I have not discussed is how pensioners interpret the causes of this transformation as well as many of the other big changes that have occurred since 1989 such as the price increases and the dissipation of the social welfare net. In this section, I explore this topic. In it I point out that most pensioners blame these changes at least in part on people who have become rich and powerful since the revolution. They argue, similar to the way in which people in Russia articulate their disapproval of newly wealthy "new Russians" (Humphrey 2002, Ries 2002), that "corruption" among such elites, rather than among doctors and nurses, is a central reason for the impoverishment of the majority of the population in the post-socialist era.

Raluca Barbu was one of the people who alerted me to the moral discourse regarding the truly corrupt in post-socialist Romania. Almost predictably, the topic came up in the context of the discussion we had about her children's need to leave Romania for work. Reminding me that labor insecurity was the "primary difference" between the socialist and the post-socialist periods, she went on to explain why she believed this transformation had occurred:

There are many employers who set out to give work to a young person or anyone with a "work book" without giving them benefits. Sometimes they give them money on time and sometimes they don't. Usually they don't give salaries on time. For this reason a lot of people regret the end of socialism. I'm telling you a lot of people feel this way. If things were in order today, you'd go to work and you'd get your salary. Instead, employers set out to steal from you as much as possible so that they can enrich themselves. For this reason children have to leave the country. Before we didn't have depravity such as this.

Raluca was not alone in expressing concern about "depravity" (*destrăbălare*) among the people who were in charge of, or who owned, enterprises that were once the property of the state or that had been newly formed in the post-socialist era. Many other pensioners talked about such elites hiring people without contracts, paying them low wages or delaying paying them at all, refusing to record their employment in their "work books" (*cărți de muncă* – a document that shows the history of one's work) and thereby neither providing them with the documentation necessary for claiming social insurance benefits nor contributing to the social insurance system, and firing them at will. And they went even further in such discussions, letting me know, as Raluca had, that this treatment of workers was to their personal benefit and thereby was truly immoral behavior.

It was not only business elites who came up for such criticism, but political leaders were also singled out as immoral characters in the post-socialist drama. Their

failure to address the needs of ordinary citizens at the same time as they accumulated immense personal fortunes made them the target of intense opprobrium from most pensioners I came to know. This included the retired doorkeeper, Mihaela Florescu, who described her disgust toward politicians in the following way, the cynicism in her commentary in no way being unusual:

I have reached the point of being a human to no one. No one cares about us, pensioners. It's as if we were some rags, as if we didn't work all our lives and paid the state and did all that we did. Forty years of work [I've done] and nobody cares about us, as if we were... the last people, we pensioners... They want to have everything... I told you I have only 1,500 lei left [\$0.05]. What do I live on until the 27th [many days away]? Will someone come to me and ask me if I have or don't have what I need? Will they say 'Here you go. You are on a strict diet, so take this half a chicken.' No, no one is interested in anyone. They all want to stuff their purses full. They have millions, but they still aren't satisfied. They want their fortunes to be as much as possible. Iliescu [the former president of Romania] has fortunes. Petre Roman [the former prime minister] too.⁵ All the leaders do. Us? We have nothing.

One may question the newness of such cynical commentary about political leaders, reminding that it did exist before, such as in the 1980s when material scarcity was a feature of everyday life in Romania. Although this is true, pensioners I spoke with described the breadth of neglect by, and the personal enrichment of, politicians as truly unique to the post-socialist era. In their opinions, a new moral order had surfaced after 1989, and it involved people with power looking out for themselves and their family and friends to an unprecedented degree while others faced the daily grind of a very new poverty.

⁵ Recall also that many pensioners in Galați consider Petre Roman responsible for introducing not long after the revolution the law allowing pensioners to retire early, a change many today believe was very unwise.

The moral commentary did not stop at business elites and political leaders, however. Pensioners also leveled criticism at the people who worked for the new crop of non-governmental organizations that had blossomed after 1989, as I have already shown with the man who accused people at the Foundation of embezzling program funds. Most of the allegations of this sort appeared vague and unsubstantiated; nevertheless, mere talk of such corruption was a sign of how morally corroded pensioners believed Romanian society had become. One example of a story about such corruption came from the Tomescus. In a number of conversations, they described the transformation of a once very close friend into a distant and corrupt stranger as a result of her involvement with an NGO. I even captured their disgust toward her during one of my formal interviews with Adrian. Tellingly, he brought the matter up in response to my asking him about people's "attitudes" toward pensioners in post-socialist Romania:

Attitudes?...Everyone is looking after himself and showing no interest in other people. Let me refer to the forms of assistance that come from abroad. People have made organizations that receive clothes and all sorts of other things from other countries. These people are absolute thieves. The people who work in such places take everything for themselves, and no one else sees any of it. The foundations they have made don't verify anyone, but I'm telling you I'd kick them out. They are not honest people. In Tulcea [the city where they lived for many years] for example,...a foundation was receiving food, household goods and clothes from Germany and other countries. But the people working there weren't giving the goods to anyone. Instead they were dividing them up among themselves. As my wife was just saying about the professor who is living in Constanța [the former friend], the one who is ill, she was also part of this organization. She would bring a car from the foundation filled with packets sent from people abroad. But the people in Germany in my opinion didn't send those packets for workers at the foundation. They sent them for poor people. But that's not what they did with them. They divided them among themselves and that was that...

Felicia added to Adrian's description a narrative about a surprise visit she made one day to the woman's home with the intention of possibly "catching" her at something. When she got to the home, no one was there, but Felicia decided to wait for the "friend." She did not have to wait long, and when she arrived she was carrying a bunch of bags filled with things. Embarrassed to be seen with them, the woman tried to hide the goods from Felicia.

Adrian was further troubled by what he called "corrupt" behavior in the post-socialist marketplace. He decried the practice among "middle-men" of purchasing produce from hardworking peasants at very low prices and then selling it in the city with substantial mark-ups. Moreover, Adrian felt it was morally questionable that market vendors often sold low-quality produce at unbelievably high prices, something that would never have occurred under socialism when far greater control was exercised over pricing at the marketplace.

From where did all this talk of corruption and moral decline among pensioners in Galați come? And was it unique to this social class in this particular city? I believe its sources were many, allowing one to truly talk about a "discourse" of corruption in post-socialist Romania. Although working-class pensioners in Galați may have been among the most vocal critics of the moral decay of their society, as shown for instance in their efforts to organize and demonstrate that I describe in chapter seven, concern about corruption was widespread throughout Romania during my research. In the following discussion I theorize what I believe were several of the main sources of this near-ubiquitous discourse.

A key source of all the talk of corruption among pensioners was the political campaigning that was going on throughout the country during a good part of my research on account of the local and national elections that were held in 2004, the former in June and the latter in November and December. The leaders of several of the many political parties jockeying to unseat the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat - PSD*), which, as mentioned in chapter two, was in power at both the national and local levels at the time, alleged that the *PSD* was thoroughly corrupt, an assertion to which the *PSD* replied by dispensing its own accusations of corruption among its contenders. For example, the *PNL-PD* alliance, the coalition which ultimately won the national election, directly campaigned on a platform to “burn the corrupt” (*arde-i pe corupți*) if they were brought to power. It was a catchy phrase on which to campaign since “*arde-i*,” meaning “burn them,” also forms the word “*ardei*,” meaning pepper, the *PNL-PD* capitalizing on this play on words by using a red chili pepper as one of their campaign symbols.

Their “fight against corruption” (*lupta împotriva corupției*) was a prominent feature of *PNL-PD* campaign ads and public appearances, including a rally the party held outside the Union Cultural Center (*Casa de Cultura a Sindecatelor*)⁶ in Galați between the first and second rounds of the national election in December 2004 – it was part of a two-week blitz they carried out in regions where support for the coalition was weakest. During the rally, which I attended and which drew several hundred people including many pensioners, the presidential candidate, Traian Băsescu, spoke explicitly about

⁶ The Union Cultural Center is a large two-story building that sits along a major avenue near the center of the city. It was constructed during the socialist period to serve as a center for “cultural” activities, including conferences, symposia, concerts and galas, for the new, working-class “masses.” (Brezeanu and Munteanu 1972, Brezeanu 1980). It signals the role unions played as cultural, rather than political, entities during socialism although one could argue that many of the “cultural” activities were inherently political. In the post-socialist period, the center has been used for recreational activities and to house a branch of the public library; political activities, such as this rally and a meeting I describe in chapter seven, were held there too.

“corruption.”⁷ Calling himself the people’s ally against corruption and poverty, he criticized *PSD* leaders for their ties to the socialist government of Ceaușescu, who at that point had been deposed for about fifteen years, reminding people attending the rally of the specific government posts *PSD* candidates had held before 1989. He also let everyone know that he was generally committed to ending “mafia” control over political life in Romania.

The Humanist Party of Romania (*Partidul Umanist Român - PUR*), whose acronym forms the word “*pur*” meaning “clean,” campaigned on a platform to extinguish corruption, a potentially dubious position for this “social-liberal” (center-left) party – as it called itself – to take, given that its leader, Dan Voiculescu, had on a number of occasions been accused of involvement in corruption scandals. Voiculescu was one of Romania’s wealthiest people on account of his former ownership of the media conglomerate *Antena Unu* and its affiliates. Although I never attended a *PUR* rally, during the campaign I did receive a series of pamphlets from the party which had “corruption” as a central theme. One of these, entitled “We Pay for Healthcare, but We Die before Our Time” (*Plătim pentru sănătate și murim cu zile*), described how the population, despite contributing to the financing of the healthcare system, did not receive free medical services. The money, it went on, was “stolen from our pockets,” a complaint echoed by many people I knew. Another *PUR* pamphlet asked “What Can be Done about Unjustified Fortunes?” (“*Ce se poate întâmpla cu averile ce nu pot fi justificate?*”) It advocated an initiative launched by Humanist parliamentarians to pass a

⁷ His intended prime minister, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, and a representative of the Chamber of Deputies, Mona Musca, spoke as well. All three wore sweaters that were bright orange, the color symbolizing both their break with the socialist past and their alliance with the west; to their advantage, similar campaigning against social democrats with strong ties to Moscow was going on simultaneously in neighboring Ukraine, the color orange being used there too by opposition leaders.

law to confiscate property from people who could not document its sources. “How have they been able to obtain hotels, commercial emporia, thousands of hectares of land, personal yachts and planes, dozens of villas and enormous bank accounts?” it asks.

Along with all of this formal campaigning about corruption, the topic appeared in other ways in connection with the 2004 elections. One of these was in the form of a small flyer I found scattered on the sidewalks in my neighborhood a day before the June polling. It depicted a masked man carrying a computer monitor on his back in a bag marked with the symbols € and \$ and stated “You Lose with the PSD” (*Pierdeți cu P.S.D.*). Compelling alone as a reminder of the prominent role “talk of corruption” played in the election, this attempt to influence local politics in a place where the *PSD* looms large was also noteworthy for its “silence” – no one claimed responsibility for the flyer, eerily suggesting that saying too much about corruption could be a problem.

All of this discussion of corruption in the run-up to the elections would probably have been sufficient in itself to create the concern about moral decline among pensioners in Galați – and it certainly had some influence on the election outcome. But there were many other domains in which talk of corruption could be heard that year, facilitating even greater focus on this issue among pensioners and their younger kin. These included a public education campaign with the catchy title “Don’t Give Bribes” (*Nu Da Șpaga*). This campaign, which was initiated in part by the Romanian branch of Transparency International (the organization founded in 1993 that has branches around the world and that has as one of its goals to draw attention to the role corruption plays in undermining development – see Transparency International 2008) and was funded by the European Union, set out to educate the population about the negative impact of bribery. Posters

portrayed “mug shots” of a bureaucrat, a healthcare worker and a police officer, all of whom are known to be common solicitors of gratuities; some of the posters urged the public to bear in mind that *șpaga* given to any of the three meant that they were being robbed – “*șpaga* means theft” (“*șpaga înseamnă hoție*”) some of the posters stated. Reprints of the posters appeared in at least one of the local papers next to articles about the campaign (N.A. 2004a, N.A. 2004b, N.A. 2004c). I did not, however, ever see them in public in Galați but did come across one in a restaurant restroom in Bucharest in early 2005.

In addition, a spot was produced for television. It depicts, once again, a bureaucrat, a healthcare worker and a police officer, but on this occasion they are shown going to a private residence, knocking on the door and being invited in. The clerk and the nurse then proceed to take money out of a drawer and the wallet of one of the people living in the apartment, and the police officer sticks a bottle of the family’s liquor into his jacket pocket. Meanwhile, a couple and their son just sit silently, dumbfounded by the whole scene, although ultimately the father jumps up and angrily kicks one of the three as they head out of the apartment. The spot concludes with the message “Not all thieves break down your door. *Șpaga* means theft. Don’t let yourself be robbed.”⁸ As part of the campaign, a survey among people in Galați of a range of ages was conducted and its results were briefly summarized in an article in a local paper (Iacomi 2004). Although the article is entitled “A Hundred Definitions of *Șpaga*,” it does not actually discuss the variation according to context in how people perceive “corruption” as I am describing here. Instead, it only reports on how most people perceive corruption as “omnipresent”

⁸ The spot can be viewed at www.nudaspaga.ro. I did not learn about it until after I returned from the field and do not know how widely dispersed it was.

and feel that one cannot get “anything done without participating in it.” Then, in an attempt to influence young minds, the *Nu Da Șpaga* campaign performed at a puppet theatre in Galați (Roșioru 2004).

It is admittedly difficult to measure the impact of this multi-pronged campaign. If postings on the *Nu Da Șpaga* website are any indication, it was short-lived with no new information appearing after early 2005. I did not see the posters in public later in 2005 or in 2006. Still, it seems to have influenced some people: Grigore Stănescu, the young man who complained bitterly about paying “bribes” to his doctors, let me know that one could call up the *Nu Da Șpaga* headquarters to alert them about suspected cases of bribery if one dared.

Another arena in which “talk of corruption” was resplendent during my research was the media, where one could regularly find reports about corruption among the rich and powerful. One favorite topic was the embezzlement of public funds that were intended to finance the operations of state-owned enterprises (e.g., Nahoi 2004, Tărăță 2004, N.A. 2005a). A typical line of these reports was that the standard of living in Romania would be much higher were it not for such corruption – “25 Billion Euros Lost to Swindlers: We Could Have Lived in Another Romania” shouts the headline to the report by Nahoi. One of several cases of such corruption that was singled out for attention in the media was that of the oil refinery *RAFO-Onești*, which is located to the north of Galați in the city of Onești. Its debt to the state, the origins of which were largely suspect, was colossal, totaling 7.7 trillion lei (about \$234 million) in October 2004. Still, company officials were alleged to receive approval to delay payment on the debt, and some of it was reportedly even forgiven.

“Talk of corruption” came up in connection with Romania’s bid for accession to the European Union, a process which was in high gear throughout my fieldwork. Corruption was regularly portrayed as one of the main, if not the primary, obstacle to Romania’s planned accession in 2007. For example, a report issued in October 2004 that evaluated the country’s progress toward joining highlighted the “widespread corruption” infecting public and private life in Romania (see A.B. 2004). Because of this, one regularly heard mention in the media of EU officials both prodding the National Anticorruption Prosecution (*Parchetul Național Anticorupție – PNA*) to more vigorously go after high-level corruption and urging the state to enact reforms that would effectively provide the judiciary greater independence from the executive branch of government, which was often accused of meddling in the affairs of the courts.

This discourse of corruption had a major influence on poor, working-class pensioners in Galați, shaping their perception of the new elites in their midst since 1989. In their opinions, the rich and powerful had achieved their status nearly always through nefarious means, and it was in good part because of their corruption that poverty was experienced by the majority of Romanian citizens after the revolution. But this discourse of corruption did more than just shape how pensioners viewed elites; it also had an effect on how they saw themselves and what they believed was proper behavior – although I would not discount the significant role the Romanian Orthodox church as well played in shaping people’s moral templates in post-socialist, as in socialist, Romania. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of these “self” perceptions among the elderly in Romania and on what they believed was morally righteous behavior.

“They Aren’t ‘Bad-Payers’”:
Moral Evaluations of the Marginalized

In describing the economic marginality of people in Galați, Sorina Leonte the retired accountant who had returned to work, said “I see what’s around me. People are struggling with a degree of poverty they have never experienced before. Since I was born [around 1945] until now I have never witnessed a period as difficult as this one.” One outcome of this was the upsurge in criminal activity since 1989, but people were not “guilty” for this, “society [was],” she emphasized. These words made a lot of sense to me, but they were also very noteworthy because of the window they provided onto the manner in which pensioners were making sense morally of the transformation their society had undergone since 1989. They were not only troubled by the corruption and moral decrepitude of the rich and powerful, but they were also ready to defend the people, including themselves, who had been negatively affected by the replacement of socialism with capitalism. Just as Sorina did not negatively evaluate people who had become impoverished and people who committed crimes because of their poverty, as I show in this section most pensioners viewed the “losers” in the transformation sympathetically and even found them faultless for at times dubious strategies they used to get by. More than this, many argued that the impoverished were “cleaner” than the people who had grown wealthy in the post-socialist era because the enrichment of such people had come about primarily through corrupt activity that was hurting ordinary people.

To put it in other words, in this section I present a number of ethnographic vignettes that show us the outlines of a budding moral order due to the transformation of Romania from socialism to capitalism, a process that Verdery began to observe early in

the post-socialist years when the big *Caritas* pyramid investment scheme was formed. She traces the “moral questions” that surfaced in connection with *Caritas*, and in this she shows that ordinary people did not find fault with people who participated in the scheme because it was one of the few options available to them after their job security had been eroded and prices for essentials had gone up. Thus, they were not morally tainted by their participation even if the money that kept the scheme afloat for some time probably came from “dirty” sources. Average citizens, in other words, were not to blame if the money had criminal origins since they were just poor people trying to survive in a rapidly changing society (1996:184-187). Similarly, one finds pensioners in somewhat later post-socialist Galați making moral commentary about their new society. In it, one begins to see the sprouting of a new symbolic arrangement, one in which wealth, materialism and urban living are defined as “dirty” and poverty, giving to others and rural areas are perceived as “clean.” At the same time, what one does not see is a marked change in the interpretation of the conditions that are causing this rethinking of morality – these continue to be viewed as structural or systemic. That is, one is struck by the persistence with which people focus on the social bases for the problems populating their lives and the lives of others surrounding them, as I have just shown Sorina to do in explaining why people engage in criminal activities. As I discuss in this section, this may very well be a legacy of the socialist years. Furthermore, it affects how people view themselves, including the degree to which they experience shame for their marginality in post-socialist Romania.

Another person who defended the economically marginalized was Nicoleta Apostol. I remember always being especially drawn in to our discussions around the

topic of poor people in post-socialist Romania. It was not that what Nicoleta said was so different from what so many other pensioners shared; it was the equivocal mix of near bafflement and yet confidence with which she in particular talked about the matter that captured my attention. She seemed absolutely befuddled by the fact that some retired people had far higher pensions than others – this simply did not make sense to her – but she at the same time firmly believed that there was something very wrong with the fact that everyone had to pay the same price for household utilities and apartment building maintenance. Nicoleta’s distress developed partly from her experience of trying to make ends meet on her small pension and Costică’s income, an especially great challenge in their case because they had to pay rent on their apartment as well as manage the other basic expenses of their four-person household. But a deeper history also lay behind her feelings. Nicoleta’s husband retired in the 1970s, and she remembered having no problem then living off of his pension and her income from sewing. She knew that a family making such income in the post-socialist period could not live with the equanimity they did back then because of all the changes that had occurred since 1989. These experiences explain the moral stance she took toward the indebtedness she observed among many people around her: it was not their fault and, therefore, “they aren’t ‘bad-payers’” (“*răuplătnici*”), she insisted, as she had heard some people call them. Although “bad-payers” was not a neologism of the post-socialist era, the word being in the vocabulary since before 1989, Nicoleta’s use of it strongly signaled her interpretation of the newly impoverished.

Another insight into the moral viewpoint of pensioners came from Dumitru Ungureanu. He, like some other pensioners, referred to himself as “poor and clean”

(*sărac și curat*). Unlike the “rich and dirty” (*bogat și murdar*), who he believed had grown wealthy through “cheating” and “stealing,” he was a man with few means who was working hard to create a new life for himself in the countryside. This moral evaluation was fascinating because of the glimpse it provided into how pensioners saw themselves, but there was a twist to the case of Dumitru that makes it even more interesting. Not only did he see himself as “poor and clean,” but he also felt that he was morally upstanding. He described himself as very religious, and he maintained close connections with an Orthodox parish in the city, at one point even introducing me to the priest and inviting me to a mass. Still, Dumitru often also seemed to stray a bit from his moral compass. As I observed, this occurred mostly in insignificant ways, as when he told me how pleased he was that the elevation of his land was high relative to his neighbors’, which meant that were it to flood in spring 2005, when major inundations were occurring in many parts of the country, he would be the least likely to be affected, but there were other things he did that almost made me think he was at times opportunistic. I recall feeling mildly perturbed by rather persistent requests he made of me for loans so that he could make a move to a village, an experience I describe in the next chapter on “strategies.” The requests were understandable, but they offered a telling insight into the moral outlook of Dumitru – a “poor and clean” pensioner struggling to get by, but also someone who felt that he deserved extra help perhaps because he was religiously pure, which made him a “cleaner” rural dweller than others. Whatever his reasons, it was clear that Dumitru considered himself a morally better person than the rich and powerful.

A “moral order” in which poor pensioners were generally virtuous also came to light in discussions I had with informants about the much noted increase in materialism in the post-socialist era. This was a development they generally disliked and found morally problematic as we have already seen earlier in this chapter in people’s descriptions of the new elites. At the same time, pensioners felt that their lack of materialism was a boost to their moral fiber. This point was made especially clear by Raluca Barbu, who as indicated in chapter three viewed herself as someone who could live without the conveniences of modern life. She further described her position on this matter in the following words:

I don’t like having material fortunes because they bring their own problems...It is better to have little that is good and to be have your health. That’s what matters to me. All I need are strict necessities in order to live in peace.

Given these sentiments, it was no surprise that Raluca experienced, in her word, “revulsion” (“*mă revoltă*,” she said) over the requests medical professionals made for gratuities, somewhat like what we saw earlier from the Stănescus. I consider her attitude here because of the intense moral evaluation associated with the new materialism she expressed. She told me about an observation she made at a doctor’s office. It involved an elderly woman offering eggs and cheese to a doctor for a consultation. The doctor did not like this “gift,” and so he asked the woman, using the informal you,⁹ ““Don’t you have money?”” Raluca, who is very amicable but who has a fairly unassailable personality, broke into the conversation at this point, asking the doctor (also using the

⁹ Second- and third-person singular and plural personal pronouns have three forms in Romanian (with the exception of second-person plural, which only has two), indicating three levels of politeness. There is some regional variation in their use, all three varieties of the second-person singular personal pronoun, e.g., being common in everyday conversation in Moldova. The doctor, according to Raluca, had used the most informal, *tu*.

informal you): “‘Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? What kind of an oath have you agreed to anyway?’” On another occasion when a similar exchange directly involving her occurred, she claimed that she said the following to the doctor: “‘You have money, and I live on a pension and run around [working]. It’s not good to take money from people because it’s degrading,’” and then she added “‘If I did this, it would be degrading to me.’” These stories sounded a bit fabricated to me, even if I could easily imagine Raluca speaking her mind in this way to a doctor, but whether true or not they clearly laid out Raluca’s stance vis-à-vis the materially “hungry” – such people were morally destitute, and she was righteous for fighting against them and for living a materially simple life.

Victoria Dobre spoke disparagingly about the materialism of the post-socialist era, and she distanced herself from it. She mostly associated it with the younger generation, believing that they were more prone to materialism since they were growing up in a changing society. As noted above, she launched her criticism especially at women of the younger generation, calling them “swindlers, charlatans, and vipers” (*șmechere, șarlatane, și vipere*) because they were only “after money” and sought to get “one man after another.” This was not how women behaved when she was young. In that time, a man might at most buy a woman a piece of candy, and a woman never chased after a man as women do today. Reflecting her disconcertedness over this transformation, when I asked her why she thought this change had taken place all she could say was that “the world has just turned upside down.” She partly blamed this increased materialism for her youngest son Iulian’s two unsuccessful marriages, experiences she attributed as well to the laziness and disorderliness of both women, one of whom did nothing but sit around and smoke and drink coffee.

The Tomescus likewise frowned upon the materialism of the post-socialist era as I have already shown in their reaction to the NGO workers, including their former friend. Moreover, Felicia suggested it could create problems in people's lives, as if morality, personified, enacted retribution against people who were materialistic, especially if they engaged in corrupt behavior. For example, the former friend suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, they told me, which left her partially paralyzed. Felicia implied that she had experienced the attack because she had behaved immorally: had she distributed the goods from abroad as was the intention of the donors, the woman would not have had the seizure, she seemed to suggest. Thus, in Felicia's mind, immoral behavior potentially had very negative consequences in one's life, and, therefore, it was wise to avoid being materialistic, especially when this involved taking from other people.

Felicia believed that it was important to give to others and to help people out since this would ensure one's place in heaven, a moral stance she conveyed to me through a parable: there was once a man who had never given anything to anyone. One day while weeding his garden he "gave" a spring onion to a passerby when he mistakenly tossed it over his fence with a handful of weeds. The offering, although minuscule and inadvertent, turned out to be enough to get him out of hell, where he was at first sent after he died. As he was departing, however, he kicked the hands of the people who held on to his legs and this led to his being tossed back into hell. The parable plainly taught both that giving even a small item – and apparently even without really intending to do so – and helping out people in difficulty were morally righteous, and they could determine where one would spend eternity.

Given these realities, many people in the post-socialist period were risking their futures, Felicia believed, since greediness had become so common. Unlike Felicia, who was poor but still gave clothing and other goods to a local Orthodox church for distribution to yet poorer people, they gave nothing. This behavior in itself was morally problematic to her, but what made it especially shocking was that everyone had suffered to just about the same degree during the 1980s but now many of these people were entirely forgetting what they had experienced then and therefore looked the other way when they confronted the poverty of others. This was, indeed, a very new morality in Felicia's opinion, one which she felt certain needed some sort of critique since it was so wrong. So, in her characteristically compulsive way, she repeatedly made the suggestion that she should send a cell phone text message with the words "Hello, you pig!" (*Bună ziua, porcule!*) to someone whose identity she at first did not reveal but who turned out to be the former friend. It was certainly a juvenile suggestion, one which I do not think she ever followed through on because she did not own a cell phone, but it nevertheless offered an insight into a very real problem that was disturbing to Felicia as to so many other pensioners: the moral compass that once had directed life in Romania was askew since the revolution.

Juxtaposed with all this talk among pensioners about the cleanliness of poverty, the wrongfulness of materialism and the importance of giving to others – their belief that they were positioned on a high ground morally while the rest of society disintegrated – was concern among a few people about shame (*rușine*). It should be emphasized that it was rare to hear pensioners talk about feeling ashamed about their lives and their poverty, but the few times it came up in conversations were thought-provoking enough for the

subject to warrant some consideration within the context of this discussion about morality. The ethnography included Victoria Dobre saying that she felt “shame” for not having enough money to buy her own food and for having to rely on the Foundation for some staples. Still, she never exactly blamed herself for her poverty, saying only that “that’s just the way it is,” which suggested that although she did feel shame, her precarious economic situation was beyond her control and not because of some flaw unique to her.

There was a reference to shame made by Cosmina Banciu. She told me about the tremendous shame she experienced when her building administrator asked her on one occasion whether she was managing on her pension and when out of desperation she asked to borrow money from a neighbor. It was never certain to me whether Cosmina somehow felt personally responsible for the conditions causing her shame or whether she appreciated their social and historical context.

A few pensioners spoke about steps they took, or decisions they made, to avoid experiencing shame. This included Felicia Tomescu, who said she decided to annul plans to ask her building administrator to allow them to withhold payment on the maintenance for a month so that they could purchase a television. The reason for this change of plans was that she was concerned the administrator would not allow them to do this – and this rejection would be “shameful” to them. This in no way meant that the Tomescus felt that their marginality was created by them, but they nevertheless were anxious about the stigma that would arise out of everyone in their building learning that they did not pay their monthly bill, which would happen since such information was public knowledge, as noted in the previous chapter. And then there was the case I already described in chapter

four of Rodica Dragomir, who worried about being viewed as impertinent by her family if she failed to pay back the loan she had received from them to buy her blood pressure medication. Once again, although Rodica was personally implicated in the matter, in no way did she ever feel there was something she had done to create the situation. Yes, she would feel some shame if she could not pay back the loan, but the cause of her shame was not her own.

Although references to shame were infrequent among pensioners in Galați, I have added them here because of the questions they raise about how people experience and how they explain their marginality in post-socialist Romania. On the one hand, talk of shame seems to suggest that some people are moving from believing that, as Sorina put it, “society” is to blame for poverty and criminality to believing that these problems flow from a lack of effort or responsibility by individual people. On the other hand, we learn from the snippets of ethnography I have presented that even if people feel shame they do not necessarily retreat from a “social” understanding of the conditions causing them to feel ashamed, just as they do not see that there is any reason for the newly rich to feel pride for their “accomplishments,” since so often their riches and material possessions have come about through criminal, or at least dubious, means. I believe these latter sentiments will be particularly lasting among pensioners in Romania because it is they who have lived the longest through the period when a “socialist subjectivity,” as Hellbeck (2006:350) refers to it, was fully inculcated. As Hellbeck points out, one key facet of this subjectivity was the idea that one was always part of a wider world rather than an individual isolated from the surrounding society.

This does not mean that people did not experience shame under socialism simply because they always felt themselves to be part of something “bigger” that explained their lives; one need only look at Verdery’s discussion of the shame some people experienced under late socialism because they had to spend so much time pulling together the necessary goods for material survival (1996:55-56). That said, I do think that we will observe an increase in the frequency with which people in Romania feel shame and to which they feel personally responsible for their lives and the conditions in which they live as the country continues along its transformation from socialism to capitalism. Hints of this already appear in research by Friedman (2007), which shows that references to shame are up among middle-aged working-class people in the Jiu Valley of Transylvania. Still, like pensioners in Galați, the mining families with whom Friedman spoke recognize the connection between their shame and the economic changes their community has undergone. It is among the younger generation in booming capitalist contexts such as Bucharest where one is much more likely to observe a more definitive transmogrification from a “socialist” to a “capitalist” subjectivity and, thus, possibly movement toward a greater sense of individual responsibility for one’s life – and shame for one’s “failures.” Future research in that context will prove whether this hypothesis is correct. From the perspective of working-class pensioners in Galați I can say that few feel shame for their poor material life, and most maintain a firm, even cynical, understanding of the structural bases for their impoverishment since 1989.

Conclusion

This chapter began by exploring one of the biggest stressors affecting the lives of pensioners in Romania: the need to pay out of pocket for healthcare services meant to be free of charge. I pointed out that this stressor is particularly problematic because it relates to people's very physical and mental livelihood. Given this fact, I explained that it is very surprising to discover that most people, including working-class pensioners and people of younger generations of this class, do not blame doctors for making requests, directly or indirectly, for such gratuities. They instead maintain a morally very ambivalent perspective on the matter, on the one hand troubled by it because they believe that some doctors have grown wealthy from it; on the other hand, very accepting of it for many reasons, including the long history pensioners have with doctors and nurses and the awareness of the economic troubles they also face.

The chapter then continued with the theme of moral commentary by exploring the sentiments pensioners hold toward the rich and powerful. In that section we learned about the lack of hesitation to condemn elites for truly corrupt behavior. I explained that such an attitude prevailed among poor, elderly people in part because of the rhetoric about corruption in the 2004 election campaigns (a topic I revisit in chapter seven), as well as other reasons. But pensioners do not exercise their moral commentary only on the rich. They also evaluate people, like themselves, who have lost out in the post-socialist era, slipping to a level of poverty that is unprecedented in their lifetimes if one excludes the conditions in which they lived during the interwar years. Such people, they argue, should not be looked down upon because of their poverty since it is not of their making. In fact, they are "cleaner" than the wealthy because they are more giving and

are not materialistic, and it is “better to be poor and clean” because this gives one ground to stand on in a society that has morally lost its anchor and because it ensures one’s place in the afterlife.

Pensioners did do much more than offer commentary on their moral righteousness to keep themselves going in what have been trying times in Romania. Many also engaged in very creative strategies to cope with their marginality. It is to these strategies that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

“We’re Stealing Water”: Coping Strategies among Pensioners

Introduction

One morning during my stay with the Dobres in summer 2006, I walked into the kitchen to find Serghei preparing to can peas we had gathered from his son-in-law’s garden and shelled the previous day. In the sink sat a large bottle into which tap water was slowly dripping. Noticing my glance at the bottle, Serghei turned to me and said “we’re stealing water.” Knowing that I understood him, he did not have to explain what he meant. Below the sink sat two meters which calculated the amount of water we used, but the meters were not entirely effective. Unable to record drops, with patience people could accumulate water without the meters logging it.

The previous two chapters focused primarily on the material and social stressors pensioners in Galați experienced in their day-to-day lives, only touching on a few of the strategies people employed to attempt to lighten the effects of these stressors, such as Sorina Leonte’s resumption of her position as an accountant following official retirement in order to supplement her budget. From Serghei’s stealing water in drops to Sorina’s working on a regular basis, the strategies in which retirees engaged in order to get by in their fundamentally changed society were more numerous than these few examples suggest, and they therefore deserve close attention as well. This chapter is devoted to examining such coping strategies. In it I will describe, on the one hand, the resourcefulness and the resilience of pensioners in Galați. In spite of the turbulence in everyday life since 1989, I show that retired men and women strategize in many ways to have a decent standard of living. On the other hand, I point out that these strategies at the

same time expose the ends to which many older people have been pushed in the post-socialist era because of the transformation from socialism to capitalism. It will be no surprise to learn that many of the strategies pensioners carry out often exacerbate the very stress they are meant to address, as has already been illustrated in the stress Sorina experienced because of her work.

This chapter, then, continues to follow a pattern shown in some of the other studies of stress referred to in chapter four; they, too, describe the tenacity of people living in stressful conditions. For example, in the study of depression and stress in Alabama, Dressler (1991) explores the “resistance resources” African-Americans relied upon to manage the stress created by an economic recession. Central among them were social support from kin and friends and steadfast faith in religion. Similarly, Mullings and Wali (2001) detail the activities in which their informants participated in order to work against the array of stressors confronting them. They point out, for example, that people filed formal grievances against landlords in housing court and that they joined neighborhood organizations in order to have a voice in efforts to improve housing conditions, and they describe people’s utilization of “flexible support systems” to lessen the blow of the stressors.

The situation of pensioners in post-socialist Romania may be even more extreme at least in some cases than those depicted in these studies among minority communities in the U.S., making it necessary to qualify any comparison of strategies between them. One can turn to some of the research on Romania for a closer fit. For example, Kideckel (2000, 2008) describes workers in Transylvania maneuvering in a various ways to counteract the stress-inducing changes that hit their communities. Miners who accepted

severance packages cut back severely on consumption while they awaited new work in the mining industry or they sought work in other sectors of the economy. Workers in the chemical industry took up employment in other domains, including farming, such jobs being available to them as a result of a locally more diverse economy.

“It Fills Me Up”: New Forms of Social Support

As I described at the beginning of chapter four, Rodica Dragomir’s spirits were raised on March 8 not only by her son’s improved health but also by the festivities surrounding International Women’s Day at the Foundation. I also noted that it was both the free food at the event that she appreciated and the social activity. Many others there felt similarly, showing me that the recreational center could serve as at least a temporary antidote to the material and social stressors so many pensioners described. All together, the opportunities for retirees to play games, converse with acquaintances, build new friendships and romantic relationships, watch television, dance and join in festivities at which food and drink were served provided a welcome counterpoint to the stressful experiences that filled their lives. My observations of activities at the center were in this respect similar to those made by other ethnographers, such as Myerhoff (1978) and Caldwell (2004), of older men and women coming together for support.

This section looks at the steps pensioners took to fill their lives with social activity, such as going to the recreational center, in order to ease the strain of the post-socialist transformation. I also include discussion of the social and practical support kin provided to older men and women because it, too, was a comfort in post-1989 Galați. The ethnography is instructive in a number of important ways. For example, it shows

that a decent life naturally comes from more than just fulfilling one's material needs; having meaningful social contact with people can, in other words, make a positive difference to one's standard of living. It teaches further that many of the forms of social activity and support that have developed in the post-socialist years are new, the recreational center trips and events being good examples of this. These have partially replaced the networks of kinship and community that were familiar to people under socialism but that today are broken down. I contend that these new forms of social support are, however, inadequate for fully meeting people's needs, a fact evident in the challenge middle-aged kin experience trying to look after their elders.

The excursion the Foundation sponsored in July 2004 to the monasteries in northeastern Romania, which took place annually if funds were available, was a vivid example of the meaningful social activity available to pensioners in post-socialist Galați. I joined 49 people (19 men and 30 women) on this three-day bus trip, visiting eleven monasteries, including two of the most revered to Romanian Orthodoxy, Sihastria and Putna.¹ Pensioners were charged nothing for travel or lodging, but they were required to pay for private purchases and to bring their own food, which in small groups we ate at roadside stops and in open fields.

The visits to the monasteries gave pensioners the rare opportunity to exercise their religious beliefs in venerated settings. Most people submitted *pomelnice* to church officials – pieces of paper on which one writes the names of others for whom ones wants prayers said. Some purchased long, thin, white candles, which they lighted and placed in

¹ The monastery in Sihastria was constructed in 1740 and includes a large community of monks. The Putna monastery, which to the majority of Romanians is the most important in the country, was constructed in the 1460s and founded by Stephen the Great, who ruled the Principality of Moldova from 1457 to 1504. It also has a community of monks.

large containers that were marked “for the living” and “for the dead.” Nearly everyone said prayers before icons located throughout the churches, as is characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy, and they put holy water in small flasks to take home with them. Participants enthused about the spiritual importance of the visits. One woman said “it fills me up,” meaning, she said, that among other things her chronic hunger pangs had vanished. A man described always feeling better for months after making such visits.²

Opportunities for reverie and socializing during the excursion were valued by the participants. As the bus traveled down the road, people sang Romanian folk songs, and some occasionally even danced in the aisle, an activity in which I participated. Meal breaks gave us the opportunity to eat and drink together, people sharing homemade wine and enjoying conversation. During these stops some people gathered herbs for treating ailments along the roadsides and in the fields. As the only person with a camera, I was sought out to take photographs and for weeks after the trip distributed pictures to people, memorabilia they said was dear to them.

Not everyone was entirely satisfied with the trip. Some felt the pace was too demanding, one man saying he thought we needed to slow down. Equally amazed by the territory we covered in three days (nearly 600 km. or 360 mi.), I agreed with him. Most people were excluded from participating in an unplanned visit on the last day of the trip to a small art museum in the city of Fălticeni because the entrance fee was 10,000 lei (\$0.33).

² Prayer, in general, provided succor to many of informants. Moreover, many faithfully observed periods of fasting set by the Orthodox church. These included a forty day period before Easter, a two-week period before Christmas, and shorter periods in June and August, during all of which one ate no food taken from an animal (including dairy products, eggs, etc.). Some people also periodically engaged in “black fasting” (*post negru*) during which they ate nothing and drank only water.

All in all, the excursion was nevertheless appreciated by most participants. It was an uplifting departure from the difficulties with which pensioners lived at home, and it showed that, although stress was a prominent feature in their lives, it was hardly the only “force” defining their existence. At the same time it reinforced a point many people made about yet another of the negative changes from socialism to post-socialism. The trip we took was a special treat today, really a luxury people told me, while under socialism such vacations were almost routine, people annually taking trips to the coast or the mountains (both 100-150 km., or 60 to 90 mi., from Galați) or to other favorite locations without the expense being a significant question.

Festivities held at the Foundation on International Pensioners’ Day (October 1, 2004) were further evidence of the meaning to pensioners of social activity at the center. This event included performances by a brass band of twelve men and by two local, popular singers of Romanian folk music. Open-faced sandwiches, pastries, carbonated beverages and mineral water were served to the approximately fifty people who attended, most of whom came finely attired, women wearing dresses, make-up and hair freshly dyed in hues such as lilac and men donning jackets and ties. Several pensioners who were talented at singing gave stunning vocal performances, and, after the brass band departed, the floor was opened up to dancing. In large numbers we engaged in the lively round dances called *hore* that lasted for long periods of time, sweat pouring off of people’s faces as we spun around the room. It was a very festive occasion, everyone enjoying the event even if a few people grumbled about the brass band playing too loudly and the cheese on the sandwiches being too salty.

The day's activities continued from here. They included an event subsidized by the local government at the city's musical theatre to which all pensioners in Galați were invited at no cost. Ștefan Munteanu, a visitor to the recreational center with whom I periodically socialized, asked me to join him and his wife at the event. I accepted the invitation, and soon we were off to the theatre. When we arrived the lobby was filled with people gathered around a small table where someone was taking people's names for a drawing of a number of household appliances, including a washing machine, a television, a vacuum cleaner and a juicer. The auditorium was filling to capacity; in the end the event drew several hundred pensioners. We found seats and at first listened to a number of speeches, including one given by the Social Democratic mayor, a matter I return to in the next chapter because of the rather obvious political maneuvering for the pensioner vote in the upcoming national election at which his speech and really the whole event were aimed. Then we were treated to entertaining live performances of singing and dancing, the act of one performer, an older man, being especially appreciated by the audience. The subsequent sweepstakes pleased the handful of people whose names were chosen, although it irked many others who were not selected. Their public response, which I discuss below, tarnished the event somewhat.

Still, the turnout to the theatre was impressive. Observing so many people there, I was reminded of the times I had attended theatrical and musical performances in Galați (some at the same theatre) without seeing more than a handful of pensioners despite the entry fees being remarkably low relative to those in the U.S. – most cost less than \$1 to see. This was no surprise, though, since government statistics show, as noted in chapter four, that on average pensioners spent in 2004 only 2.8% of their income on

entertainment. As with the vacations that were available under socialism, many people spoke about regularly attending theatrical and musical performances during that time; the socialist regime made them affordable even if it did nothing to ameliorate the freezing temperature in theatres during winter.

Hence, International Pensioners' Day, the monastery trip, other ceremonies and everyday activities at the recreational center were quite valuable social events to many pensioners. In spite of this fact, I from time to time perceived a sort of "fragility" to social life at the center that appeared to relate both to the superficiality of some of the ties among people who went there and to the broader uncertainty of life among pensioners in Galați. Victoria Dobre confided in me at one point that two of the women attending the center had harshly rebuked her in front of other center visitors when she unintentionally (she said) interrupted their conversation. She called them "foul-mouthed gossipers" ("*mahalagioaicele*") because she believed that they were among the center visitors who lied to the Foundation administrators about other visitors' income in order to jeopardize their access to the monthly staple packets – a practice that some other pensioners also accused a few center visitors of doing, as mentioned above. Victoria said that she began to keep a low profile at the Foundation, going only to get her packet, out of fear that she might run into the women, and when she did attend she said she watched very carefully what she said around people.

I observed other fissures in the social life of the center when one of the visitors made fun of two women who went off on their own one day to talk privately. In saying wryly to some of the other women who remained behind that the two women, who were unrelated, had "'family' secrets" (*secrete de 'familie'*), she revealed a distrust among

center visitors that did not surprise me. Also suggesting the fragility of social ties among pensioners who came to the center was the news during my 2006 visit from Rodica Dragomir, which I had already learned from Victoria, that she had broken off a relationship with another woman who attended the center periodically. She said that they had had a fight in public – indeed, right in the recreational center – over a matter the details of which she did not tell me. Rodica only said that the woman was an “awful person” (“*răutăcioasă*”) and that she was particularly upset over the matter because she had trusted her for some years and they had been good friends, the woman on occasion even having Rodica over to her home for lunch. This was not the only indication from Rodica that center life could be contentious for people. She told me one day about feeling envy toward some other visitors because they had possessions she could not afford, for example, new pairs of shoes. And I have already noted the distaste the woman with the pension that was somewhat higher than others felt when on International Women’s Day visitors rushed to the tables for food.

Some pensioners had kin to whom they could turn for financial and social support, as I have already illustrated with Constanța Iorga, the young woman who looked after her ailing parents; Raluca Barbu, whose children sent remittances that gave her a financial advantage over other pensioners, and Alexandra Câmpeanu, whose daughter regularly traveled to Galați from Constanța to take her to the doctor and give her money for her medications. Although on the surface such care-giving appeared to follow a culturally normative pattern, as I have pointed out above, closer examination of the cases actually reveals the tremendous tension that kin experienced from attempting to manage the needs of their elders in what were insecure times and the stress pensioners felt from

creating such pressure in their younger relatives' lives. Alternatively, as with Raluca Barbu, stress ensued from pensioners' kin being socially absent from their lives. Perhaps it was in this area of life that the impact of the rupture from socialism was most tangible, given the moral obligation weighing upon people to care for their elders, the immense difficulty facing them in trying to do this and the all but complete failure of the state to make up for the erosion of kinship networks that previously would have managed people's need for care in their older years. As the director of the county Public Health Authority put it in an interview, a "home care" infrastructure like those in western countries, had "not even begun to be created" in Galați. This left family members who had not departed from the city to care for their elder relatives at a time when they could hardly bear this.³

A few other cases make this point even clearer. Radu Popescu, the market vendor I befriended, is another revealing example. He described the pressure many people underwent attempting to fulfill a mix of financial and social obligations toward their parents and other older relatives, given that they faced difficulty meeting their immediate family's needs. Radu, for instance could barely stay afloat selling housewares at the market, and he had a family of four to support. His business was so unprofitable and the rent on his stall so high that he closed up shop at the Central Market while I was in the field and opened another stall at a smaller market with lower rents. The smaller market also proved unprofitable; no sales whatsoever were made during a weekday afternoon when I sat with some of his family at the stall for more than an hour. Ultimately Radu

³ As I have already noted, not all young people felt a moral obligation to look after their elders. There were even cases I occasionally came across in one of the local newspapers about elder abuse (Mototolea 2004a, S.F. 2004a, 2004b). I do believe, however, that these were exceptions to the rule, most young people being committed to caring for their aging parents and other kin.

departed for work in Italy. What this means is that, although Radu felt obligated to care for his elders, the strain he was under in attempting to support his own family made this nearly impossible – and the fact that he could not do so was an added stressor to him.

A school teacher I met one day while walking with Constanța, who was acquainted with the woman from the Foundation, expressed even more urgent concerns than Radu regarding care needed by an uncle of hers who was in his nineties. He was a retired university professor with some financial assets who lived alone since his wife died several years earlier. She reminded Constanța, who had arranged for a retired woman to look after the woman's uncle a few hours each day, that he actually needed assistance around the clock. Indeed, she described him accidentally throwing away an envelope filled with money a few days earlier. She was equally concerned that he would set off an explosion by failing to turn off the gas on his stove. Given that he did not have children and the city lacked space in its nursing homes, his care had become the niece's responsibility, but she could barely handle it as a result of responsibilities she had to her own family and her job.

For many middle-aged and younger people, caring for elder kin was a significant challenge. Still, as I have pointed out, it was often the only source of support that remained for pensioners, especially those who were too ill to take advantage of some of the social benefits available through the Foundation. That such support was so fragmented, or in many cases all but absent, spoke to the impact of the transformation since 1989 and to the change it brought about to a once familiar world.

“They Started Making ‘Suggestions’”:
Complaining, Exaggerating and Lying

The sweepstakes drawing at the musical theatre on International Pensioners’ Day did not proceed smoothly. An administrator from the County Pensioners’ Union (*Uniunea Județeană Pensionarilor – UJP*)⁴ took a box filled with the slips of paper on which people had written their names and poured it onto a large table on the stage. Without spreading the pieces of paper around, she began selecting individual slips and calling out the names of winners. Not long after she started doing this, some audience members began stirring when their names were not selected, especially as others assembled on the stage to accept their prizes. As she continued calling out names, some people began to openly gripe about the contest although I could not make out what they were saying. Ultimately, a man shouted out that the selection process was unfair because the *UJP* administrator had failed to mix up the names and was only picking from certain parts of the pile. Hoping to calm people’s nerves, she began to choose names from other parts of the pile, but inevitably this did not satisfy everyone because in the end only a limited number of prizes was available.

Although the *UJP* was an organization administered by and advocating for pensioners, making the general discontent and the explicit objection about the selection process rather predictable, this brief incident was nevertheless a telling snapshot of the strategic use of complaining among pensioners to improve their situation. Throughout my fieldwork, as we have already seen, pensioners regularly complained about a range of

⁴ The *UJP* is an organization that lobbies local government officials on behalf of pensioners and co-sponsors various events for them. In addition to the *UJP*-sponsored event held on International Pensioners’ Day, I attended a meeting organized by the *UJP* in April 2004, an experience I describe in chapter seven. The *UJP* of Galați is affiliated with the National Federation of Pensioners’ Unions in Romania (*Federația Națională a Sindicatelor Pensionarilor din România*).

concerns, including their too low pensions, water dripping through their ceilings, the apparent cutbacks in the Foundation's food packets, treatment they received from their doctors and much more. On some occasions these complaints were shared with me privately, but at other times they were made directly to officials in public settings, as we saw when the police came to the center to talk about crime, and as we will observe in chapter seven in pensioners' organized "complaints" in the form of demonstrations and rallies to government officials. People acknowledged that this sort of public complaining was new to the post-socialist era, which on the surface told one that democratic change had indeed come to Romania – now people could fearlessly speak their minds in public when during socialism such protesting was all but impossible. But, often in the same breath, many were equally emphatic that complaining was of little or no use – "today you can say all you want but no one will listen to you," they would say. Even so, pensioners did not stop complaining.

Pensioner complaints require thoughtful interpretation. They released tension created by the relentless material and social stressors that had invaded people's lives, and they gave this impoverished group a margin of control, or at least a sense of control, over their situation, the examples in chapter seven of the results of organized public "complaining" again offering particularly good insight into this. At the same time, as I pointed out in the introduction, there was also a cultural element to the complaining; that is, openly lamenting to others was viewed as an acceptable linguistic practice in contemporary Romanian society, something Ries, too, encountered in her research on conversational genres among Russian intellectuals (1997:83-125), as I also noted below.

Related to this point about complaining being a cultural practice, or indeed a strategy to improve one's material existence, was my perception that a few people's complaints were not "real"; that is, I sometimes wondered if certain people were being untruthful in their grievances. For example, when a few people told me about struggling to make ends meet on their pensions, I questioned to myself whether their pension earnings were their sole source of income. The uncertainty I felt was then later confirmed in a few cases when I began learning more about the array of strategies focused on in this chapter that people employed to supplement their income.

Confounding such doubts was some people's determination to make sure I knew that pensioners' laments were based mostly on falsehood. For example, the 18-year-old daughter of a Foundation administrator, who temporarily worked at the Foundation during summer 2004, let me know on a day when packets were being distributed that I should be wary of pensioners' interminable complaining – they "exaggerated" their problems, she insisted. Initially, I was quite bothered by the young woman's interpretation of pensioners' complaints, believing she was belittling their problems; I even felt that I knew their situation better than she, a cultural "insider," did. Yet in time I realized she was probably drawing attention to the reality that pensioners did protest to improve their situation. As well she may have been working to make me her, rather than their, ally, with the expectation that something might come of this.

Others who believed that pensioners tactically complained and exaggerated varied in their opinion of whether these were legitimate behaviors. This included Grigore Stănescu, who told me a story about an encounter he had had with an older couple. One evening he and his wife, both tired from long days at work, got onto a crowded bus, but

they had the good fortune of finding seats. A bit later on the trip, an elderly couple entered the bus; they were not so fortunate and therefore had to stand. Ending up close to Grigore and his wife, by and by they began, in Grigore's word, to make "suggestions" (*"apropouri"*). That is, they started talking loudly enough between themselves so that others would hear them, saying that when they were young they would always give their seat to an older person and remarking that in general young people were much more respectful of elders back then than they are today. Irritated by these "suggestions," Grigore said he told the couple that they could have taken a walk near their home instead of getting on the bus and that he had been working all day, comments which he said were effective at getting them to move to another part of the bus.

Grigore interpreted the incident as an example of the tendency among pensioners to moan over unimportant matters, but I wondered if such complaining might have won them seats from a more sympathetic audience. At the same time, I doubted the veracity of the account since it did not seem quite real to me. Even if just a "story," it proves the point that the "complaining pensioner" was a phenomenon of the post-socialist world enough on people's minds to lead them to talk about it. Nor did my conversation with Grigore about "complaining pensioners" end there. He went on to say that he often overheard them talking about how troubled they were over the high price of pharmaceuticals. In this case he was in agreement with them – their complaints about expensive medications, that is, were on target in his opinion – a feeling that surely stemmed from his personal experiences with health problems.

Overall, complaining, exaggerating and outright lying, like some of the other coping strategies discussed here, could make only minor improvements in people's lives.

When Victoria Dobre asked, for instance, that I not tell people at the Foundation that I would be staying at her home for some weeks, she explained that hiding this fact from them would keep her from getting cut out of the packet of monthly staples. Aware of her family's immense debt to the building association, I agreed to stay silent about the matter. Put somewhat differently, complaining, exaggerating and lying, although often ineffective or of limited consequence, did nevertheless give impoverished pensioners some leverage over their deteriorated standard of living. In a few cases, they even bore fruit, if only temporarily. As discussed in chapter seven, pensioners' complaints about the high price of medication influenced political leaders to offer compensated medications for a brief period before the 2004 elections.

“This Food is Free for Us”:
Field Gleaning and Other Subsistence Activities

Shelling and canning peas, and “stealing” water, were not the only subsistence-related activities in which I observed Serghei Dobre engage. During part of the year, he, like other pensioners, was constantly involved in a number of other strategies to cope with the high cost of food at the market. One of these in particular impressed me deeply, mostly because of the tremendous effort it involved. I learned about it during my June 2006 visit when on stepping into the kitchen again one day I found him peeling potatoes with a knife. Pausing to show me that they were dry and limp, he said that they were the last of the stock he had accumulated through field gleaning. Interested in learning about this subsistence activity, I asked him to describe how he did it.

Serghei said that each year in November he rode his bicycle out of the city to farms where he knew that large quantities of produce remained in the fields even after the

harvest. After receiving permission from landowners to glean from their property cost-free, he would gather on average eight large sacks of potatoes – totaling about 300 kg. or nearly 660 lbs. – 40 of corn cobs and several of onions, carrots and parsnips. He transported these gleaned crops home on his bicycle, and he and Victoria, and also Iulian after he returned home, partly subsisted off of them for more than half the year, the corn however first being taken, also by bike, to a mill for grinding so that it could be made into *mămăligă* at home.

It was without question a very draining activity, but it also affected his health. Serghei traveled great distances to glean some of the crops; the potatoes, for example, were available only in fields some ten km. (six mi.) from Galați. In his youth he said he could easily have managed such a ride, but in the present day, at the age of nearly 70, pain and weakness in his knees made the journey quite painful. The gleaning itself as well had health consequences; it aggravated his injured pelvis. Making the process even more challenging were occasional troubles with his bicycle, which he had purchased, used, in 1980. A few days before we talked about his gleaning, for example, I observed him repairing it over several hours on the apartment balcony. Normally a soft-spoken man, he openly talked about his frustration at how easily the bicycle fell apart.

It was clear that these “minor nuisances” would not stop Serghei, however; the gleaning was necessary to them because, as he frankly said one day, “this food is free for us.” Another indication that the activity was important to them – especially as pensioners – was the fact that Serghei began to glean in such quantity only after he retired, his having gleaned only here and there in younger years. And, although I gained my most intimate insights into the activity from Serghei, it seems many other working-class

pensioners relied on such field gleaning for subsistence, according to observations he made. One can find such activity in other cultural and historical contexts – Varda’s documentary on gleaning in contemporary France (2000) and King’s discussion of this activity in early industrial England (1991) come to mind. In the French case in particular, not all gleaning results from tight budgets, some people motivated to glean for other reasons. Within the Romanian context, the gleaning is one of the most visible signs of the decline in standard of living among pensioners.

Gleaning was not the only subsistence activity in which Serghei engaged. Another was fishing, which he practiced on a regular basis in some of the rivers, canals and lakes surrounding Galați. For example, he rode his bicycle to the banks of the Siret River, some four kilometers (2.4 mile) from home, to fish. Alternately using a net or a pole, he would catch a variety of fish that were all mostly just a few inches long, bleak, crucian and pike being the species he would most often accumulate. As with the gleaning, this activity had health consequences, Serghei complaining about pain in his lower back, knees and hands from the fishing. After returning home, he would dump the fish in the kitchen sink and proceed to remove their scales, later bagging and freezing some of them and breading and frying others for immediate consumption. Given that they were usually small, the fish only modestly contributed to the food available in the household, but Serghei, at least, enjoyed eating them.

Serghei did not always fish alone, at times his family joining him. During my stay in 2006 Serghei, Victoria, their eldest son, his wife and I traveled to a canal east of the city to fish. We arrived there using the son’s car, driving for more than an hour within the network of canals before settling on a suitable location. Along the way we

observed many people fishing, even stopping occasionally to ask if they were having any luck with the day's catch. After picnicking together near the canal's edge, Serghei, his son and daughter-in-law proceeded to fish. Victoria and I mostly observed, I sensed because the others wanted to do the fishing, until she decided to gather a plant called "tail of the mouse" (*coada șoarecelului*), known for its medicinal properties, and nettles for use in an upcoming holiday,⁵ which I helped her do. Within several hours, the others caught approximately two kilogram of fish each. This included Serghei's catching one nine inch specimen, which caused excitement among everyone fishing nearby.⁶

As obvious from the crowded conditions around the canals, fishing was popular among many other people besides the Dobres. I often saw people, usually men, fishing along the Danube. On many days as I walked to the Foundation I observed men selling fish that most likely came from local waters. Although fishing was a source of food, people engaged in the activity out of pleasure and for other personal reasons. In Serghei's case, for example, I suspected his fishing was a welcomed reprieve from the at times strained relationship he had with Victoria.

Fishing as a recreational activity, or even a subsistence strategy, was not new to the post-socialist period; Serghei's son-in-law, Cezar Șerban, described frequently fishing during socialism. He even proudly showed me the simple rod from the People's

⁵ Victoria later took the thorns off of them, trimmed their purple flowers, attached slips of paper to them, each with the name of someone in the household written on them, and set them on the windowsill overnight. The ones with flowers that re-grew by the next morning brought luck to the person whose name was attached to them. Victoria did not know the origins of this ritual.

⁶ There was a lot of other activity on the thin strip of land next to the canal besides the fishing and medicinal plant gathering. I observed farmers grazing cows and sheep on it and a man gathering frogs came along at one point. I commented to Victoria that it was a beautiful "park" in order to gauge her perception of the land. She chuckled and said it was not a park but a "lovely landscape" ("*peisaj frumos*"). I then asked who owned the land. She hesitated, and being concerned that I had raised a sensitive question I answered myself by saying it must be state-owned, to which she agreed. The public use of the land nevertheless suggested it was a sort of "commons."

Republic of China he had been using for more than twenty years to fish, criticizing the overly sophisticated nature of modern fishing equipment. Yet there were some important changes in the conditions affecting the activity since the socialist era. A major one, notwithstanding the free access to fishing at the canal, was the increasingly restricted public access to waterways around Galați as a result of new laws and the privatization of land since 1989. The expense of crossing the Danube by ferry, 20,000 lei (around \$0.65) for a one-way trip, which was necessary because no bridge crosses the river at Galați, the nearest being 70 km. (approximately 43 mi.) upstream, was another new barrier to fishing since it cut off people's access to once favored waterways south and east of the city. Serghei and Cezar told me that they often made the trip for fishing during socialism, at least until under Ceaușescu ponds in the area were filled in for agricultural purposes, but no longer did so because the expense was not worth it.

The increasing costliness of fishing permits could be a hindrance to engaging in the activity. Serghei had not renewed his permit since 2001, restricting his use of certain waterways. Although he may have been keeping from me stories about risks he took to fish in areas requiring permits or about times he paid off police officials to continue fishing in restricted zones, his expired permit and the other restrictions limited the areas where he could fish; others were similarly affected. Because of this, it was no surprise to observe restricted waterways, such as part of the bank of the Danube on which Galați sits, at times teeming with people fishing. These changes, unwelcome at any time by a people who seemed to really enjoy fishing, were especially bothersome in the post-socialist era when the activity was relied upon by some people to supplement their diet at little or no cost.

Lurking behind all of this discussion with Serghei and others about fishing in the waterways around Galați was the question of whether industrial pollutants contaminated the fish people consumed. It was an awkward topic to bring up with the Dobres since I could see they enjoyed the activity and appreciated their catch – I feared offending them by asking whether they thought the fish were a threat to their health. But other people did talk openly about how contaminated the waterways around the city were. This included Nicoleta Apostol, who described drinking from the Danube in her youth, which she spent in a village in the river’s delta. To this she attributed her fine health until she was in her sixties but knew that one could no longer do this because of the industrial facilities built up after the Second World War. The topic of pollution in local waterways periodically arose in the media; it was clear from these accounts that toxins in the water were believed to be a serious risk to life. One article touching on pollution in the Siret (one of the rivers flowing into the Danube at Galați) referred in a subheading to the “Death of a River” (*“Moartea unui râu”*) (Crâangan 2004:7; see also Amălinei 2004:7).

As pointed out in describing meals at the Dobres in chapter four, Serghei and his family supplemented their diet with produce Serghei and Cezar grew on land belonging to Cezar’s family in a village to the west of Galați. During my stay in 2005, I had the chance to see directly what came from this land by joining Serghei, Cezar and Cezar’s two young sons one day in a trip to the village. Together we picked grape leaves and gathered beans, peas, lettuce, squash, parsley and dill in a garden one-tenth of a hectare in size, to which Cezar applied no fertilizer and which he did not water, the harvest nevertheless being very bountiful. Part of the crop we gathered was distributed to Serghei’s immediate household because he regularly worked in the garden, rising early in

the morning in spring and summer to sow, pull weeds and pick produce. As I have already noted, the Dobres canned this produce or consumed it immediately, or in some cases they dried it for later use. As with the gleaning and the fishing, this gardening was not unique to the Dobres, other pensioners with access to land relying on it to fill out their diets. I recall, for instance, once running into Nicușor Iordache, the retired equipment repairman, carrying sacks of produce. He told me that he had come from the countryside, where he had visited a sister and worked the land, bringing the vegetables from her garden. A number of other informants had access to produce grown on land they or their family owned, such as Dumitru Ungureanu or Raluca Barbu, or they owned land in the city on which they gardened, such as the Niculescus. Much more than the gleaning and the fishing, gardening was not at all new to the post-socialist era as I have already shown in some of the life histories. What was unique about it now was some pensioners' enormous reliance on it since their income so insufficiently covered the cost of food.

Not all pensioners had access to such produce since they either owned no land or none of their kin owned land to which they had access. Indeed, this was the case for many of the pensioners I met who either lived too far from family with land to profit from their harvest, as was true for instance of Rodica Dragomir, or simply no longer had ties to anyone with land. Because of this, or because they did not have Serghei's stamina and resources such as a bicycle to gather food through gleaning, they coped with the high cost of food through other means. One of these was to purchase large quantities of vegetables in the autumn when prices were at their lowest, canning and storing them (an activity women did more often than men despite the example of Serghei) for later consumption. One day in the fall of 2004 Ana Dinescu showed me the provisions she

had purchased for the upcoming winter, her kitchen counters covered with brilliant red peppers, plump tomatoes and potatoes that she would can or store away. In that same fall, the aroma of baking eggplants, peppers and other vegetables, ultimately made into delicious treats like *zacuscă*, permeated apartment building stairwells and drifted out of people's windows; I even observed a man roasting vegetables on an outdoor grill next to the apartment building in which he lived. Although this canning and storing saved pensioners a good deal of money on produce that in the winter months would become prohibitively expensive, like the gardening, it, too, was not exactly a new strategy for putting food on the table; most pursued these activities under socialism as well. What appears unique about them in the post-socialist years is again their increasing importance to pensioners, who otherwise would have scarce means to obtain food for everyday consumption.

In this section, we have learned, in part from the perspective of one family, about a number of strategies – gleanings, fishing, gardening, canning – that pensioners used to get by in lean times. On the one hand, such strategies are impressive; I certainly was captivated when Serghei told me about his gleanings. They showed that pensioners would not give up in spite of the dire circumstances in which they lived. On the other hand, we can see the negative impact of so much hard work. I have described Serghei's back and knee problems, but the toll of all his gleanings and fishing was actually most visible, indeed painfully so, in the utter exhaustion he experienced during many of the days I stayed with the Dobres. Not only did he say from time to time that he was tired, but he often nodded off during meals and in the middle of conversations, sometimes knocking his head up against furniture. As we know, pensioners had had to endure the tedium of

standing in line to purchase food in the 1980s when it became scarce on the official market (Verdery 1996:65). This, too, could be exhausting. Often one did not know exactly when food would become available for purchase; perhaps the wait would take hours. One could, though, make “arrangements” such as having another person take one’s place in line so as to temporarily depart to pursue other errands. Still, the activities pensioners carry out in the post-socialist era to obtain food are more strenuous it seemed to me, a perception that was supported by many informants, who recalled that life was less demanding for older people under socialism than it is today.

“I Don’t Sit Around!”:
Formal and Informal Work

Stepping out of a maxi taxi on my way to the Foundation one morning I noticed an elderly woman on the sidewalk selling colorful handmade socks made of wool. Interested in looking at the socks and learning about her work, I approached the table where she sat. To my surprise, she said she made the socks and other items, such as hats, by purchasing clothing from secondhand stores, unraveling it and then knitting the material. Her method seemed ingenious to me, but to her it was all but second nature since the clothing at secondhand stores could be purchased cheaply, especially after merchants’ stock no longer included high quality items. This did not compromise the quality of her work; a bright red pair I purchased from her held up well.

It was not only the woman’s resourcefulness that made an impression on me. Her sock knitting added to a tally of notable examples of formal and informal work activities that I encountered among pensioners in part for much-needed cash. These “on-the-side” activities contributed to people’s official pensions, or they entirely made up for their

absence. As with the other strategies pensioners used to make ends meet, these illustrated people's indomitable resilience in the face of trying conditions and they revealed the negative side effects such work could have on people.

The woman selling socks on the street was not the only person who made clothing for sale. Nicoleta Apostol did this too, evidence of which I observed during most of my visits to her home. The sewing machine she kept in her living room was covered with a different fabric each time I was there, and on one occasion a man dropped by to inquire about a job she was doing for him. Her clientele was extensive as a result of her many years as a seamstress, which made it possible for her to make some money from the work. Still, some changes in recent years undermined her business, ironically the most important being the propagation of secondhand stores that made it possible for the other woman to cheaply make socks. People were now less interested in tailor-made clothing, she told me, because they could sometimes find nice items at little cost at the used clothing stores, a change that a tailor with a shop in the city, where he had been making clothing since the 1940s, corroborated.⁷ In addition to the threat posed to her work by the used clothing stores, Nicoleta said that her arthritis sometimes made the task rather painful.

Some pensioners engaged in agricultural labor to make money, rather than to directly provide subsistence, and for other reasons. This included a man in his early 70s who was retired from a long career in metallurgy both at *Sidex* and at a plant in Hunedoara, a city in Transylvania. Running into him one day in fall 2004 near the

⁷ For insight into the effects of the global secondhand clothing industry see Hansen's (2000) analysis based in Zambia. Among other topics, she examines the ways in which people make use of secondhand clothing in ways that they wish just like the woman who unraveled it to make socks, indicating that secondhand clothing has not had a uniform impact globally even if in many cases it does threaten the business of local tailors.

Foundation, I learned he had just returned from picking grapes in a village on the northern border of Galați county. Although he said he was grateful for the opportunity to get out of the house and work, he let me know that it was not only to occupy his time that he had picked grapes – he had not done it for “*pomană*,” he said, meaning that he had not done it for “nothing.” He went on by saying that had he not gotten involved in the grape picking there, he would have gone to Spain to pick grapes. His son, who was working there, let him know that work was available, but he received the message only after he had begun picking grapes in Galați.

As I have already shown in a few cases, such as the accountant Sorina and the transportation worker Gheorghe Niculescu, some pensioners took on long-term employment in order to add to their monthly pension checks. Another example of this came from Raluca Barbu. After her retirement from the textile industry, she held an administrative position at her building association. But even this task did not entirely occupy her time or address her need for more income. Telling me “I don’t sit around,” she described being busy on many days that she was not involved in building association business, rushing around the city taking care of a range of bureaucratic matters for various paying clients. I ran into Raluca during one of these “missions” in the city, and she was indeed in a flurry. I imagined Raluca nevertheless managing such tasks with little delay given her somewhat commanding personality, but she said she felt quite exhausted at times because of the work.

The ethnographic glimpses I gained of pensioners working were not insights into unusual or entirely new practices. The “working retired” was a common phenomenon in post-socialist Galați, and it took place under socialism. Pensioners who took up

employment, informal or formal, were sometimes profiled in one of the local papers. One example that was especially compelling was that of a retired man who traveled around the city gathering waste for recycling. He explained that he made far more money from this activity than he earned from the state for his retirement from 40 years of working at *ICMRS*, the manufacturing facility that produced iron and steel works and concrete products – the latter brought him two million lei per month (or about \$61), but with the former he netted an additional six million per month (about \$183) or more. This money was necessary, he said, because his children were occupied with their own lives and his wife was quite ill and needed medication and regular attention from a doctor, a story that was familiar to other pensioners in Galați (Pașilea 2004:6). Although no pensioner I met personally talked about embarking on the same endeavor as this man in order to bring in more money, probably in part because the recycling work was extremely physically strenuous, many nonetheless worked in other, equally challenging domains in order to make up for the sparse retirement income they earned. This was not, however, the only reason pensioners engaged in employment, and in a few cases it may not have even been the most important reason. Indeed, the income was very important to Raluca Barbu, but she worked after retirement furthermore because of the sense of purpose it gave her, which was true for the man who picked grapes. More than this, although Raluca never explicitly told me so, I had the strong impression that she took on the jobs so as to fill the “space” left empty by her children’s absence. While it may be true that motivations beyond the material drove people to work, it is certain that some of the work also had negative consequences, as when sewing aggravated Nicoleta’s arthritis.

“I Want to Build a Shelter in the Countryside”:
Urban to Rural Migration

During the monastery trip in July 2004 I met Dumitru Ungureanu. He ameliorated his discontent over the stressful conditions of life as a pensioner with a plan to move from Galați to a nearby village, a process I observed over nearly two years. He was my only informant who made such a move, and his migration to a rural area also did not correspond with the increasingly common pattern in Romania of people leaving the countryside for cities.⁸ I nevertheless was fascinated with his decision to leave Galați since it appeared to be a “road” to a better life for him, a quite young pensioner. Still, the move was not without major challenges. In this section I describe Dumitru’s uncommon migration.

Dumitru retired from a career as an electrician at *Sidex* in 2002. Although he was only about 50 at the time, he was granted approval to retire at that age because he had worked in a toxic environment. Around the time of his retirement, his marriage of twenty-two years fell apart, and, as a result, he and his ex-wife sold the apartment in Galați where they had lived together. With the money from the sale, Dumitru purchased a piece of land measuring 1/10 of a hectare (approximately a quarter-acre) in a village about ten km. (six mi.) from Galați. He began immediately to cultivate wine grapes and other produce on the property, meanwhile making plans to move there one day to live.

When I first met Dumitru he was renting a room in Galați for 900,000 lei (\$28) per month, a somewhat manageable sum with his 3.3 million (\$100) monthly salary.

⁸ From 1998 to 2002, the percentage of people living in rural areas grew from 45.1 to 47.3 (after having declined from 46.8 in 1989 to 45.0 in 1997). The number of people living in rural areas also grew in this five year period, increasing from 10.1 to 10.2 million. By late 2002 this trend had reversed, the percentage and number of people living in rural areas declining. In 2004 it dropped below 10 million for the first time ever recorded (*Anuarul de Statistică* 2005b)

Still, he was very unhappy with his living situation because he considered the rent payments a waste of the money he could have been saving for his move to the countryside. Making matters worse was his landlord's charging him for apartment repairs, which Dumitru thought was unfair because he did not own the place. These circumstances so compelled Dumitru to pursue his goal of moving to his land that a few months later he took out a loan for five million lei (\$153) from the Pensioners' Mutual Fund (*Casa de Reciproc Pensionarilor - CRP*).⁹ With part of the money, he purchased a small two-room trailer from a local Orthodox church, saying he would move it to the land in the spring. He would use the rest of the money to rent a vehicle to transport the trailer.

When I returned to Romania in spring 2005, Dumitru had followed through on his plans. Having moved the trailer to the land, he was now spending most of his time there, coming to Galați only once or twice per week, during which he would stay overnight at the home of a retired nun, who I think charged him nothing for his lodging. He invited me to visit him on the land. Once there, I discovered that he had planted tomatoes, carrots, beans, parsley and other vegetables and that a sizable portion of the holding contained a vineyard. The trailer sat in a corner of the property, and he was indeed living in it although it was without electricity, running water, a telephone (and he did not have a cell phone either) or a toilet; part of the roof had been damaged in the move. He did have a stove with a canister of natural gas attached to it and some furniture. And more than this, his spirits were high because he was not losing money in the city and he was living on his land.

⁹ The Pensioners' Mutual Fund is a public credit union from which pensioners are able to take loans once they have contributed a minimum of 1,670,000 (\$51; figures listed here are for 2004). Borrowers are required to pay monthly installments of approximately 500,000 lei (\$16) until the loan is paid off. There is a fee of 400,000 lei (\$12) on each loan. In addition to taking out the loan, Dumitru borrowed 100 euro from a friend, which he said he would have to repay in euro, but I am not sure if he also owed interest on it.

On that visit, I asked him what he would do with the crops he grew. Dumitru explained that he would not sell them, saying his output was too small to make such an effort profitable. Instead, his produce was for private consumption and to give as gifts to village neighbors. The gift-giving had a specific purpose; it was suitable recompense in rural areas for people's labor. That is, one could offer vegetables and wine, instead of cash, for help on various projects, allowing rural dwellers to form particularly intimate, reciprocal ties with one another. Thus, Dumitru said he planned to give vegetables and wine to his neighbors in exchange for their assistance in building his house on the land, telling me he had "convinced" them this would be to their advantage.

When I returned in June 2006, Dumitru still resided in the trailer. He had spent the winter in a neighbor's home, reciprocating his lodging by taking care of their dog and fowl. Unable to go to the countryside, I instead met him in the city one day when he came to Galați for an appointment at a bank with a loan officer. I asked him about the appointment, and he told me he was anticipating getting approval for yet another loan. He said that the amount of the loan this time would be much higher than that of the loan he took out from the *CRP* (51 million lei, or \$1860) and that he would be charged an interest rate of 7.5%. He explained that he would be required to pay back the loan over a period of five years in monthly installments of 1.2 million lei – payments that, I later calculated, would amount to more than he was estimating. I was uncertain whether he was mistaken or had inflated the rate for some reason.

As during our meeting in 2005, his mood was generally quite positive. Surely part of the reason for this was that the value of this land had increased near-exponentially since he had purchased it – having cost him 200 million lei (\$9400) in the year 2000, in

2005 it had a value of about one billion lei (\$36,000). He said that if he were to sell it he could easily afford a nice apartment in Galați. He had no intention of doing this, though, being very satisfied with his ability to grow his own food and looking forward to heating his future home with wood, which would cost a quarter the price of the heating in the city. Moreover, he said he appreciated being back in the countryside because it reminded him of his boyhood in a village in Moldova, and, even more than this, he said he was pleased by the prospects of one day creating a small “shelter” (“*culcuș*”) on the land to which he hoped to invite a female companion.

As I have said, Dumitru’s experience was unique among my informants, largely because he was one of the more financially well-off people I met in Galați. It nevertheless provides a glimpse into a strategy a working-class person used to cope with the stress brought on by the post-socialist transformation of Romanian society. Fortunately for Dumitru, the strategy of buying land worked out because the value of his investment accelerated in a short period of time, he had the skills from his youth to work the land and the means to “pay” others to help him, and his income was high enough to allow him to take advantage of the increased availability of bank loans. Adding to his strength was faith he held in the Orthodox religion, Dumitru maintaining close ties to the church in Galați from which he purchased the trailer. He was energized, too, by knowledge he had accumulated about alternative medicine and diet, describing in detail the methods he used to secure good health, including eating plenty of vegetables and keeping fasts on different occasions annually, including the “black fast” (*post negru*) mentioned above. None of this means that Dumitru did not work hard for the success of his strategy or that he had an especially comfortable situation materially and avoided

feeling stress like so many other people. Indeed, as I noted above, stress was a problem he commonly faced for many reasons. Still, his experience does reflect one of a working-class person somewhat better positioned socioeconomically than others because of his former occupation and his gender.

“One Cent at a Time”:
Borrowing Money and Related Strategies

As I have just pointed out, Dumitru’s borrowing practices were common only to a relatively privileged group of pensioners whose comparatively higher income and ownership of property gave them access to loans that were unavailable to many other retirees. This does not mean that much more disadvantaged pensioners did not also periodically borrow money, as we have already seen with Rodica Dragomir, who asked for a loan from a family member to pay for medication. In their cases, however, the sources were typically kin, friends or neighbors and the amounts were significantly lower, usually at most a few hundred thousand lei (a few dollars). The retired doorkeeper, Mihaela Florescu, explained how such borrowing worked:

For example, [imagine] you are my neighbor. You would give me 100, 200 or 300 [thousand lei, or three to nine dollars] until I would get my pension. When I would receive my pension, I would pay you back. You, in turn would do the same, borrowing from others, for example from her [Alexandra Câmpeanu, in whose living room we were conversing]. Although she’s older, she lends money to others, including to me...She also borrows from family and others. For example, if she has money to give...If she doesn’t, I go to another neighbor, and I borrow from them because I have no other means. It’s quite difficult, very difficult.

Although Mihaela’s description of borrowing was rather matter-of-fact, it ended with the meaningful suggestion that there was a risk this coping strategy might not work

out. Other people emphasized this likelihood when they told me about their recent experiences with borrowing, or attempting to borrow, money. This included Victoria Dobre, who related her attempts to borrow money in order to reduce her growing debt to the building association and to pay for property taxes in the following manner:

You borrow one cent at a time, from one month to another. You borrow, but when you get your monthly pension, you have to pay it back, which again leaves you with no money. So again you borrow, and it goes on like this.

“And where exactly do you borrow from,” I then asked.

Well, in fact you can’t easily find people to borrow from because people don’t have money...Everyone is miserable because they don’t have money.

I asked again about possible sources of loans, Victoria responding that one could request them from “neighbors” and “relatives,” but again she indicated that such requests would likely be left unfulfilled “because they don’t have money either.”

Some pensioners, such as Felicia Tomescu and Cosmina Banciu supported Victoria’s theory with descriptions of experiences they had had being turned down by neighbors for small loans. Both said that they had approached next door neighbors to borrow 100,000 lei (about \$3) but were sent away empty-handed. For Felicia this meant not being able to purchase a medication she said she needed. Other evidence that options for borrowing had become limited appeared in requests I received from a few informants to lend them money. These included Felicia’s asking me for 200,000 lei (about \$6) to pay a veterinarian to treat their cat, money which she promptly returned on the day she said she would. Other examples were two attempts by Dumitru Ungureanu to borrow large sums of money – five million lei (about \$150) the first time; 200-300 million lei (about \$7,500-\$9,300) the second time – to finance his move to the countryside.

Although he did have access to the *CRP* loan and ultimately also to the bank loans, his requests suggested that these options were not particularly manageable even on his somewhat better-than-average salary. I turned him down in both cases for a number of reasons, one of them actually being that he did have the access to loans that so many others did not, but the fact that he asked me again underscores that even for him those loans came at a cost. There was then a time when I lent a small amount of money to Costică Roman to defray costs for his daughter's primary school graduation because it was evident that he had no other option.

Significantly, some pensioners let me know that difficulty borrowing money was new to the post-socialist era. For example, a market vendor in my neighborhood, a working-class man in his early fifties who had been forced into early retirement with a modest severance package (or *disponibilizat*, as it is called in Romanian) when the company where he was employed privatized, told me that in the present day borrowing was often impossible because people did not have money to lend, while under socialism this had not been the case. In that period, it was fairly easy to obtain a loan from someone because people had savings and because everyone could be relatively certain that money they lent to others would eventually be repaid, neither of which was the case today. What this change meant, he emphasized, was that people no longer had access to a once reliable source of money – their social network of family and friends – the outcome of which could be felt especially if one experienced a serious health problem that needed treatment. Hence, in the vendor's opinion it was the wage and pension insecurity and the high cost of living that had diminished a practice that had once been customary among most people.

Not everyone totally agreed with this theory. For example, the Tomescus believed that another major reason for the challenge one could face getting someone to lend money was that people who were doing well since 1989 “completely forgot” what it was like under socialism to live with limited resources once, in the post-socialist period, they had begun making money. Felicia was convinced that this was the reason her next door neighbors refused to lend her the 100,000 lei. She said that she knew they had plenty of money because they had a daughter working in Germany who sent them remittances although it was never clear to me how she was so certain of this.

Both of these theories for the drop off in lending have their strengths. Most people, indeed, simply did not have the cash they had under socialism to lend to others and, even if they did, there was greater reason to worry whether it would ever be paid back. In other words, the vast network of social relations that most people had available to them under socialism for emergency borrowing – or for gaining access to scarce resources, as Sampson describes (1983:75-77) – had dwindled significantly; most struggled on their own to get by or left the country. But it was also true that people’s attitudes toward their financial resources were changing in the post-socialist era. No longer were they seeing their “personal” income as available for reciprocal distribution; instead, they were gaining a greater sense of individual ownership over it, a change that could almost have been predicted to accompany Galați’s economic transformation. Such a turn has been observed in a wide range of cultural contexts, including in other regions of Romania (e.g., Mills 2003:49, Polier 1996:7, Verdery 1996:180-184, Wiessner 2003:153). The transformation to a capitalist society often alters people’s attitudes toward “their” money, leading them to feel it is their possession and not open to wide

circulation, including to their own kin in some cases. For this reason, it is no news that pensioners were finding it increasingly hard to borrow money from people upon whom they once could rely, just as it made sense when a friend in Bucharest said in about 2004 that the sort of borrowing and lending that went on among his kin and friends even into the 1990s was dying out. Given this alteration in attitudes toward money, it seems likewise expected that, as we saw in chapter five, a few people would begin to feel shame because of their lack of financial resources since how much money one had was increasingly being viewed as a personal matter.

Unable to borrow money from family, friends and neighbors, some people turned to the near-ubiquitous pawnshops in Galați in order to obtain cash when they needed it. I had my first insight into this practice not long after beginning fieldwork when one older woman who relied upon Foundation packets told me she had pawned earrings and her wedding ring in order to purchase necessities. Not everyone felt comfortable with the idea of pawning, however, if it meant relinquishing even temporarily an item, indeed a wedding ring, that held symbolic and personal value. Victoria Dobre described a woman she knew who pawned her wedding ring several times, returning to the pawnshop each time that she had money in order to retrieve it. Her marriage eventually ended in divorce, which Victoria blamed on the ring pawning – one should not pawn something that God has blessed, she affirmed. Her son Iulian pawned one of his wedding rings, and although he did this only after the marriage was over, Victoria still did not fully accept his doing this because of the religious significance of the object.

It is arguably partly for this reason that few of the pensioners I came to know actually described taking advantage of available “credit,” often at high interest rates, from

local pawnshops in order to get by. In addition, it seems that pawnshops in Galați limited the sorts of goods they would accept; once apparently open to acquiring a variety of household items as pawns, gold jewelry appeared to have become their main focus when I was in the field (Zegrea-Grinberg 2004). I state this with a certain amount of hesitation because the reference here is from a report that appeared in a local newspaper, and I did not on my own investigate the specific practices of pawnshops; nevertheless, most observations I made of pawnshops in Galați suggested that jewelry made of gold or silver was the focus of the owners since this was typically the only thing displayed on counters and in windows, an observation I made also in the nearby city of Brăila, population about 230,000. In her study of pawning in the small city Rovinari in southwestern Romania, Vinea (2007) notes that a feature distinguishing its pawnshops from those in large cities is the fact that the latter typically only accept gold items as pawns while in Rovinari a wide range of household goods could be pawned in the city's seven pawnshops.¹⁰

It was possible to outright sell one's possessions as well in order to obtain money. One person who seemed to take this option seriously was Ana Dinescu. She, more than most of my informants, had good reason for this since, as noted earlier, she had a quite impressive collection of paintings and furniture in her small apartment. Describing her ruminations about selling off some of her items, she handed me a brochure from an

¹⁰ See this study for discussion of the "recommodification" of personal possessions that takes place in the process of pawning them. Vinea discusses how people in Rovinari decide upon the "pawnability" of items they own by considering their multiple values, including their personal or symbolic importance, their exchangeability and their use value to a household. She points out that people's relationships to the objects they own is transformed in this process. Moreover, Vinea examines the social relations that have developed between clients and owners of pawnshops, concluding that the connections that often develop between them are characteristically limited since they center specifically on the circulation of goods between households and pawnshops and do not develop beyond this sphere. This is therefore another example that, unlike under socialism when people generally had large networks of social relations to tap into in order to satisfy their need for commodities, in the post-socialist era a narrowing of the avenues available for people to get by has occurred.

antiques store in a county in far western Romania; it states that the company “buys furniture, porcelain, clocks, silverware, paintings and decorative objects at competitive prices.” Ana never confirmed whether she sold any of her items to them, and few other informants considered this option simply because they had few, if any, items that would be appealing to an antiques collector. That said, I may be underestimating the material value of some of the things people had in their homes, such as a desk in Victoria’s home that she purchased with the money given to her as dowry. If it did have exchange value, though, she may have been unaware of what she could get from it.

The practice of buying basic necessities on credit was a related strategy that I kept my eyes open for during my stay in Galați. One afternoon while conversing with Vasile Maniu and a shopkeeper to whom Vasile had just introduced me of a small store selling bread and several other basic food items, a middle-aged woman came into the store and “purchased” four loaves of bread (totaling about 22,000 lei or \$0.66) on credit, the shopkeeper writing her debt to the store in a notebook she kept at the front desk. The notebook appeared to have other names in it, possibly including Vasile’s, which would have made this a strategy he used to get by that was similar to his spreading out payments to the building association for winter heating. This glimpse into the use of informal credit in Galați notwithstanding, the practice did not appear common among pensioners I came to know. It was rarely discussed by people. When I asked pensioners “how do you get by?” (“*cum faceți față*”?), a question that I often put to them, I received a wide variety of responses as shown in this chapter but almost no one ever talked about purchasing food or other goods on credit. Moreover, I do not recall hearing people refer to buying

goods “on credit” (“*pe datorie*”) or “on the book” (“*pe caiet*”) as other ethnographers have observed in other contexts in Romania (Lăţea and Chelcea 2002).

At first glance, this apparent lack of buying on credit among pensioners in Galaţi appears to relate to the urban setting; one study that Lăţea and Chelcea refer to in their 2002 article concludes that the average beneficiary of informal credit in Romania lives in a house either in a village or in the margins of a city with a population not larger than 30,000, ten times smaller than Galaţi. But a closer examination of informal crediting in Romania shows that there is more nuance to the practice than this suggests. Lăţea and Chelcea observed people making use of informal credit in Bucharest, and they point out that it does exist in other large cities. They do mention, however, that pensioners who take advantage of this strategy tend to live in rural areas. The question nonetheless remains as to why this practice seemed so rare among pensioners in Galaţi. Perhaps it was an oversight on my part and therefore an area for future research, but my greater sense is that many shopkeepers in the city would have been reluctant, unless they had a personal relationship with someone, to opening themselves up to extending informal credit to the large pensioner population known for its chronic lack of adequate income – especially since they, too, had an inflexible bottom line to watch out for.

“I’ve Spent Five Years at the Cemetery”:
Gathering *Pomană* Offerings

I have already explained that “giving *pomană*” – the offerings to the dead – is a practice central to Romanian culture. I have also explained that people’s ability to carry out the practice is more and more threatened by the dispersal of kin to far-flung places

and the expense of goods needed to make a *pomană* offering. What I have not yet given attention to are the circumstances that drive some people, in many cases pensioners, to “seek out” *pomană* offerings and the degree of success they have with this strategy, which like many of those described in this chapter is new to the post-socialist era. This section explores this aspect of the practice of “giving *pomană*” by laying out in more detail the experiences that induced Lenuța Moldovan to go to the cemetery to receive *pomană* goods. I describe the outcome of this strategy, including some of its “benefits” and more about some of the stressors it generated.

I met Lenuța Moldovan during a stroll I took through one of the main cemeteries in Galați one afternoon in late summer 2004. Lenuța struck up a conversation with me while I was looking at some of the lots in what I would learn was an area of the cemetery where she tended to sit and where there was a gravesite of a young girl that she said she kept tidy, hoping for recompense from the girl’s kin that she bitterly said never came. Our encounter that day turned out to be a very fortunate experience because of all I learned from Lenuța then and in subsequent meetings we had and because of the contacts it provided with some of the other people who came to the cemetery for the same reason as she did – to obtain *pomană* offerings.

Lenuța was a cook who retired shortly after the revolution. She had two sons and two daughters, and as described above, she lived with one of her sons in a cramped space, her husband (and his father) having died about five years earlier. Her family’s financial situation was very shaky. Lenuța earned a modest pension of 1.4 million lei (or about \$43) per month. The son she lived with worked informally in construction for little pay (from 50,000 to 100,000 lei per day, he said) but only sporadically because of his illness.

Making matters worse, his wife had been laid off from an administrative job at *Sidex* not long before I met the family. They received little support from other family members in shouldering their basic expenses. Lenuța's other son had left some years earlier to work in Italy, but they had not heard from him since his departure, the only news of him coming from an acquaintance who told her that he had been jailed for a crime he had committed. Both of her daughters, who lived in Galați, were in a generally "poor state" according to Lenuța because their marriages had fallen apart and they, too, had very limited income. One of them, for example, earned 700,000 lei (\$21) per month cleaning people's apartments, and she had three children, one of whom suffered from hemophilia. Topping all of this off, Lenuța herself had health problems; she suffered from cardiovascular disease, which she blamed on her years of working tirelessly in a kitchen and on the "extreme 'upset-ness'" ("*supărare mare*") she experienced from living in tight quarters and having so little money, her use of that word, rather than "stress," being a reminder that a more "local" framing of emotional experience still prevailed among some; recall, too, that Lenuța was one of the few people who was certain sorcery created health problems. She could not treat the condition professionally, instead relying on alternative therapies to manage it. This partly resulted from her pension being the main source of income in the household and their having six people to feed, her son, daughter-in-law and their three young children.

When Lenuța said that a lack of food was a chronic condition in her household I was hardly amazed. She said that the problem was eased somewhat by a neighbor who now and again gave them a few staples, Lenuța showing me a collection of small plastic containers the person would fill for them. But this was not enough, and mainly for this

reason she would go to the cemetery. “I’ve spent five years at the cemetery,” she announced, going there on most holidays and weekends, when she knew people would be coming to give *pomană* since one could “put off” an offering to the weekend if the anniversary of someone’s death occurred on a weekday when giving an offering was impossible. She said she ate some of the food she received on the spot, but took other offerings home with her, giving them to her family as a *pomană* offering on behalf of her husband. At times her bag was quite filled; once she even showed me a few of the items she had received, including a piece of bread with cheese on it and a packet filled with a few peppers and biscuits. It was hardly an enormous amount of food, but the offerings did supplement her family’s diet.¹¹

Lenuța was not alone in heading to the cemetery to take advantage of the free food people distributed there as *pomană*. I observed many other pensioners – about a dozen or so on minor holidays; many more on major ones – typically more women than men, sitting on benches near the entrance to the cemetery or waiting in other areas of what was indeed a quite sprawling space. Even though it was not always perfectly clear that a pensioner had come to the cemetery for the *pomană* offerings, I observed enough *pomană* distributions to know that many who were there had come for the goods. In some cases, I even observed people enjoying the handouts right on the spot.

This picture almost appears rosy, but competition and struggle actually occurred around the practice of receiving *pomană* at the cemetery. For example, Lenuța once rushed over to a woman who had just given another pensioner a large piece of cake to ask if she had more to give. I did not see the outcome of the request, but, either way, the

¹¹ She did also receive clothing and other material goods from people as *pomană* from time to time, on one occasion exuberantly showing off a formal jacket she had received.

interaction indicated that getting *pomană* offerings was not necessarily certain. There were others who were after the same thing, contributing to the stress already instigated by the worry that people might steal from one or that one might be mugged at the cemetery, or about being “driven out” of the place by the police. That said, I probably did not stay around the pensioners at the cemetery long enough to observe whether people entirely “controlled” certain areas where *pomană* distributions occurred or whether serious fights would break out over access to *pomană*. Still, I was very aware that Lenuța appeared to have her “turf” in the cemetery even though it was not certain what she would do, if anything, if some unwelcome person entered it, and I do know that she distrusted just about everyone who came there for *pomană* offerings, including women who sometimes sat together with her.

What is absolutely certain is the fact that the gathering of pensioners at cemeteries to receive *pomană* offerings is new to the post-socialist period. People I asked said that it either never occurred under socialism or, as a retired teacher told me, was “very rare” then; she added that if someone had come to the cemetery for that purpose they would have been stopped by the *Securitate*. Thus, in this practice we see again one of the many strategies pensioners used to cope with the austerity of recent decades.

Conclusion

This chapter does not exhaust the strategies pensioners use to counteract the stressors confronting them in the post-socialist period. I have described several of the most common that people shared with me or that I observed, including turning to the Foundation or kin who are still in Galați for support; complaining, exaggerating and lying

about a variety of matters; gleaning, fishing and gardening for subsistence or canning and storing produce for the winter; engaging in formal and informal work activities for wages; moving to a village to escape some of the expenses associated with urban living; borrowing, or attempting to borrow, money from kin, friends and neighbors and going to the cemetery to take advantage of the *pomană* offerings people distribute there. As I have pointed out, many of these strategies reveal the resilience of pensioners in a very trying time; they show that, in spite of the breakdown in the conditions familiar to them under socialism, they do not give up in their efforts to make life more tolerable – a self-evident point, perhaps, but the ethnographic details of pensioner strategizing to get by are nonetheless important. Yet in examining these strategies one sees that most of them include “traps”; that is, when one looks closely at them, in many cases they exacerbate the stress and strain that people were working to alleviate by engaging in the strategies in the first place. For example, one sees how exhausted Serghei gets from all the gleaned, fishing, gardening and canning that he does and one learns about the pain he experiences in his knees, back and hands from these experiences; one gains insight into the “fragility” of social life in the Foundation’s recreational center and observes how challenged young people are in attempting to meet the needs of their elders. One also discovers how distrustful Lenuța is of other pensioners who come to the cemetery for the valuable *pomană* offerings. What this means is that the strategies pensioners use to get by are hardly fool-proof. And more importantly than this, many of them unveil how truly “alone” pensioners are in the post-socialist era in taking care of their needs. Gone is the once rather “protective” state that provided a level of security that made old age relatively comfortable, and absent are the kin who once looked after the elderly.

Concluding here would be incomplete, however, since I learned about other, somewhat more encouraging, “strategies” in which pensioners engaged. In exploring the lives of working-class pensioners in Galați, I discovered that many people “fight back” in order to change their situation – to bring back, that is, at least some of what has been lost since 1989. It is to such actions that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

“‘We Swear, We Won’t Vote for You Again!’”: Pensioner Political Mobilization

Introduction

One morning in early spring 2004, two regular visitors to the recreational center, Liviu Neacșu and Doina Ene, entered the space to make an announcement to people already gathered there playing games and chatting. Moving in a flurry from one group to another, they told everyone that a public meeting sponsored by the Galați County Pensioners’ Union (*Uniunea Județeană a Pensionarilor - UJP*) would be held the following day at the Union Cultural Center.¹ We learned that a number of government officials, including the mayor, would speak, and that the public would have the opportunity to address the mayor in a question-and-answer session. Liviu and Doina hailed the meeting as important because of the elections just two months away for mayor and both city and county councils – it was an opportunity, they pointed up, for pensioners to influence the direction of local politics. In her characteristically energetic manner, Doina extended an invitation directly to me, and I went with enthusiasm since it would be one of my first insights into political mobilizing among pensioners in Galați.

This chapter presents a description and analysis of this political meeting that follows the “situational analysis” model commonly known as “the Bridge,” that Max Gluckman applied to a set of events that occurred on a single day in 1938 in “Zululand” (Gluckman 1958, see also Vincent 1990:278-279). As in “the Bridge,” I begin by

¹ The Galați County Pensioners’ Union is an organization that defines itself as “apolitical” and “independent from political parties, state administrative organs, religious groups and any other government or political institutions.” Its central aims are “humanitarian-philanthropic,” including providing “support, defense and representation” to all pensioners regardless of “nationality, sex, age, political or religious affiliation, profession or former occupation” (*Uniunea Județeană a Pensionarilor* 2003). I briefly describe the history and some achievements of *UJP* Galați below. Pensioners’ Unions exist in the other 41 counties of Romania and the capital.

describing the setting in which the meeting occurred, the people who attended, the speeches officials made and the questions the public asked. I then analyze the meeting, placing it into the wider political and historical context. In this I show that the meeting is but one example of social movement activity among pensioners in the post-socialist period. Such activity, I point out, has become nearly commonplace in recent years, a significant change from the socialist period (and even from the early post-socialist years) when as noted here organizing was all but impossible. The present-day possibility to publicly speak one's mind to officials, to demonstrate or to engage in other forms of political activism tells us about the depth to which democratization has rooted itself in Romania. Although, as I have already indicated in chapter two, it would be quite wrong to say that the full consolidation of democracy has occurred, the vibrancy of social movement activity among pensioners in recent years undeniably indicates that steps have been taken in that direction. At the very least, space has been made for the public to fight against the state in order to bring about real change.

I then pick up on the question of how effective such organizing is in improving people's lives in Romania. On the one hand, it does appear to be a powerful tool for making a difference in one's life, given a set of meaningful concessions that the political establishment extended to pensioners in the months immediately prior to the 2004 election. On the other hand, I point out that such organizing in many cases is effective only to a small degree, many, but not all, of the concessions slipping away not long after the vote was in, for example. Because of this, it may be more accurate to say that politicians are more successful at influencing pensioners – an ever more important demographic group – to their electoral ends than the reverse, offering them “treats” at the

last minute or feeding them rhetoric about corruption, in order to ensure their vote. Both of these devices were used by the main contenders in the 2004 election, and it seems they worked to attract some component of the pensioner vote.

The Meeting

I arrived at the Union Cultural Center at approximately 10:30 in the morning the next day. At the building's main entrance a small group of finely attired elderly men and women was already gathered in the sunny and crisp early spring weather. Since I was already acquainted with several of them, I extended my greetings, observing that the group's mood was generally rather upbeat. We then proceeded into the center, which was quite dark because no lights seemed to be on, and headed to a room bathed in natural light where the meeting would be held. The space was akin to a small auditorium, rows of chairs permanently affixed to the floor facing a dais with lectern, chairs and a table. I was welcomed by a *UJP* administrator, who gave me a copy of the organization's brochure (*Uniunea Județeană a Pensionarilor* 2003). She insisted I take a seat in the front row, where the executive director of the Pensioners' Foundation as well as the heads of other support organizations for pensioners would soon sit. The space, poorly ventilated in spite of its large windows, most likely to avoid being drafty, was already warm and grew increasingly airless as it filled with people. Although it was difficult to count the exact number of people who attended, I estimated that approximately 100 people had come, there being more women than men.² On the dais several public

² A roll call was taken before the meeting that confirmed that more women than men were present. I am not certain what this gendered dimension to the meeting meant. It may have simply been that women learned of the meeting in greater numbers than men, but it may have pointed to gendered variation in strategizing for change, women being more compelled to pursue formal political channels than men to

officials and the representatives of a few non-governmental organizations began to assemble. Included among them was the Social Democratic mayor, Nicolae Dumitrescu, who was seeking reelection in June; the executive director of the County Department of Pensions and Other Social Insurance Benefits; the president of the County Pensioners' Union and (arriving later) the head of an organization providing support to women.

At approximately 11:30 the meeting began. The first person to speak was the president of the County Pensioners' Union, who expeditiously read a paper describing the *UJP*'s accomplishments over the previous four years. These included lobbying city hall, the local council and the County Health Insurance Authority (*Casa de Asigurări de Sănătate*) on several issues important to the retired, among them the cost of property taxes, the availability of reduced fares on public transportation, general conditions within the healthcare system and the state of public infrastructure. These efforts had been successful, resulting in tax cuts on property; increased access to reduce-priced fares on the city's buses and trams; general improvements in healthcare services; an increase in access to tickets for treatment at many of the country's spas and repairs to both streets and sidewalks. The president then described the *UJP*'s plans for the near-term. The mayor and the head of the Department of Pensions made speeches too, describing interventions the local government had made on behalf of pensioners and future plans to address the concerns of the retired. Throughout these presentations, the audience sat quietly, the only interruption being the occasional ringing of the mayor's cell phone. Although the presentations were somewhat nuanced in tone, the overall message they

persuade leaders. A small demonstration I observed more than two years later, which I describe below, that was constituted almost exclusively of men suggests that there may be something to this argument. At the same time, I find it problematic because of the stereotype underlying it of "passive" women and "active" men, which certainly belies many observations I made.

conveyed was that measurable success had been achieved in improving the conditions of the city's retired population.

After the speeches, the audience was given the opportunity to direct questions and comments to the officials. A woman toward the back of the room was the first to take advantage of this. Disrupting the generally solicitous tenor of the meeting, she tearfully described the hardship she experienced trying to manage her budget for food, utilities and building maintenance, and she pleaded with the mayor to address her needs by raising the income of pensioners. I did not know the woman, and I was not familiar with the impression others had of her, but it was clear her manner of addressing the mayor was unwelcome. A stir broke out among those assembled in the room, and the woman who had given me the *UJP* brochure commented aloud that "guests" were present. This discord was quickly brought to an end, however, by temporarily interrupting the question-and-answer session. Suddenly the floor was opened to the director of the women's rights organization to give a speech. It was a curious moment: although it appeared fairly obvious that the change was in response to the impassioned remarks of the woman, the move was handled with such aplomb that on the surface it seemed to be part of the day's plans.

The possibility to make comments and to ask questions was not abandoned, however. After the representative of the women's NGO gave her speech, the floor was reopened. This time people expressed their concerns to the mayor in a more "polite" but still direct manner. This included Doina Ene complaining about the still-high rate of taxes on property and cemetery lots. In spite of the reductions in these rates, they remained burdensome in her opinion and needed to be cut back further, a sentiment with

which I would later learn many other people concurred. Then the *UJP* administrator made a request of the mayor: she urged him to make financing available for the construction of a recreational center so that pensioners would have another place to gather together socially. Ștefan Munteanu put two of his concerns on the table: he requested that local authorities repair the worn-out sidewalks in his neighborhood, and he asked why there were still delays in passing legislation that would compensate people, including him and his family, who had been exiled from the region east of the Prut River (present-day Republic of Moldova) when the Soviet army advanced against Romania in 1944. Then another man unfamiliar to me made a complaint with which, as I pointed out above, I would become increasingly familiar: his ceiling was leaking and he wanted help with paying for the repairs.

These comments and concerns prompted no immediate response, the mayor only taking notes while people spoke. When he finally did reply, what he said was largely general in scope, although he did specifically say that the problem of run-down sidewalks was much worse in many other neighborhoods than in the one in which Ștefan lived. The mayor also mentioned how important he thought it was for kiosks to be replaced by large, consolidated stores so that shopping for food and other items would be easier for city residents, including, he seemed to imply, pensioners.

With these comments from the mayor the three-hour meeting drew to a close. I lingered in the room for a short while to observe the activities that followed, but noticing that the crowd was dispersing very quickly, I left the Union Cultural Center, running into Ștefan Munteanu along the way. Unfortunately, there was little opportunity to talk with him as he, like a small group of women with whom we briefly exchanged greetings,

seemed eager to catch a bus at a nearby stop. As a result, this first glimpse into a variety of political activism among pensioners came to an end.

The next morning I headed to the recreational center. Along the way I encountered the woman who would later say that her son had vanished from her life after leaving Romania for work. She asked if I had gone to the meeting. I replied that I had and had found it “interesting,” to which she guffawed. Then she cynically assured me that no good would come of it because it had all been a meaningless façade. Symbolizing this was the fact that the *UJP* sponsored a gathering after the event to which pensioners were not invited. I was uncertain whether she was correct about this; although it seemed predictable that the mayor and other speakers would be honored in some manner, I had not heard anything from others about the gathering and thus wondered if it were a rumor. In any event, her critique was stunning especially because the meeting could also be easily viewed as “successful” since pensioners were given the opportunity to publicly air their concerns and complaints to a public official, acts that would have been unheard of under socialism. I did not pursue the topic with her further since she so rarely came to the Foundation, but her words were nevertheless noteworthy since they corresponded with that oft-repeated utterance: “today you can say all you want, but nobody will listen to you.”

The Immediate Outcome

This axiom at first seemed to accurately describe the meeting and its impact. Although packets of food were distributed to the elderly poor by city hall that Easter holiday, no major concessions were made to pensioners prior to the local elections. Nor

were most of the concerns considered important to pensioners attending the meeting mentioned in a lengthy discussion with Dumitrescu, the *PSD* mayor, on a local television station (*TV Galați*) in June two days prior to a run-off vote between him and his closest contender, Eugen Durbacă, a *PUR* politician. The discussion was meant to be a debate between the two, but Durbacă failed to show up. Instead, Dumitrescu focused primarily on problems facing the younger generation, such as unaffordable housing and unemployment, although he did bring up the issue of worn-out city sidewalks. So it appeared that the concerns of pensioners were indeed largely being neglected despite people's efforts in the meeting to call attention to their concerns. Was it that Dumitrescu and other *PSD* politicians were so certain the pensioner vote was theirs that addressing what mattered to them was largely unnecessary? Were the troubles expressed at the meeting going to be ignored or, at best, to receive limited attention, and had the meeting therefore been something of a farce as the woman at the Foundation said?

If one takes an exclusively local-level and short-term perspective on the meeting and its aftermath, the answers to all of these questions appear to be yes. There was no major threat to the sitting *PSD* mayor in the June 2004 election. Durbacă was a well-known face in local politics since he had held the seat as mayor of the city for a term in the 1990s, at which time he, too, was a Social Democrat, but he had lost favor with some city residents partly because he had grown wealthy since 1989 and had dubious ties to the business world. And many "*Galațeni*," that is people from Galați, anyway sided with the *PSD* as shown, for example, in a march of support that was held for the party before the election. It moved down one of the main avenues toward the center of the city and was not only very large but also included people of many different generations. As a result of

these local conditions, there was far less pressure on city officials to show that they were doing something for pensioners in order to bolster the mayor's reelection chances than was the case in other parts of the country.

It is exactly a broader perspective that one needs in order to fully appreciate the meeting's full impact, however. Even though the *PSD* was relatively secure in Galați, this was not the case in many other parts of the country and at the national level. The June elections proved disastrous for the party in Bucharest, the *PSD* losing much of its mandate in the city. Only one of its six sectors (*sectoare*) went to a non-*PNL-PD* candidate, and that winner was Marian Vanghelie, a one-time *PSD* politician who had lost credibility with the party and had become an independent, and who anyway was often ridiculed for being inarticulate and not very bright. Added to this electoral defeat for the *PSD*, the *UJP* meeting was not some isolated incident distinctive to Galați.

Such political activism among pensioners had become common to many parts of the country. Most of it, including the meeting, came out of pensioner social movements that had flourished in recent years. These social movements were not all on exactly the same page; their constituents varied somewhat according to class, and the demands they made against authorities were not all precisely the same – the movements, that is, had their local “flavor.” By examining the movements from a macro-perspective, however, one can see that they coalesced, figuratively, to make a point to the political establishment – pensioners would not be passive in their poverty, nor would they just cope as best they could; they would organize, and they would fight to try to improve their standard of living. In an upcoming section, I turn to some examples of recent social movements and other political activity among pensioners in order to support this point.

Before doing this, I briefly theorize the “social movement” so that it is clear what I intend by this concept.

Theorizing the “Social Movement”

The concept of the social movement has received voluminous amounts of attention in the literature. In this section, I do not summarize the key debates that have swirled around it, urging readers to turn to Edelman (2001) for such a review. Instead, my purpose here is a much more modest one of referring to a few of the main ideas in the literature helpful for understanding the new-found political activism among pensioners in post-socialist Romania.

A useful point of departure for theorizing social movements can be found in Calhoun’s instructive research on the concept (1993). From him we learn that the social movement is a phenomenon that develops outside of the state; it is not directed by state authorities, involving instead the coming together of average citizens on their own accord or, I would add, with the encouragement of and pressure from other ordinary citizens. According to Calhoun, there are a variety of reasons for the formulation of such movements; recent history suggests they have served many ends. Although in making this point he does not quite recognize the relative novelty of the social movement to the political life of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union perhaps because he wrote not long after 1989, the phenomenon is indeed new to the region, especially Romania, even though a few examples of such activity under socialism have been investigated (for example, Weiner 1999). After all, state authorities made it difficult, or all but impossible, for such movement activity under socialism, as I have already noted. Calhoun’s point

that there are many reasons for the emergence of social movements is nonetheless well taken. We may only want to add that there are contexts in which ordinary people may find it “best” not to organize and therefore that it is a clear sign of increasing democratization in a country when social movement activity is openly thriving around many issues in the way he describes.

Calhoun teaches us that social movements vary significantly in the techniques their participants use to draw attention to their concerns. For example, some rely heavily on direct action against governments in order to bring about change, the efforts of ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) especially in the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis in my opinion exemplifying this; others employ more formal strategies to attempt to get what they want. Moreover, Calhoun reminds us that social movements do not necessarily mean the same thing to all their participants. Although this point may be counterintuitive, it has actually been supported by many researchers of the social movement phenomenon.

Edelman (1999) is included among these researchers, but he teaches us about many other features common to social movements. One that I find particularly important largely because, as I describe below, I knew many pensioners who did not get involved in political activism is the observation that most social movements gain the support of only a small percentage of the people they potentially represent. The reasons for this are many and vary from one context to another. Given that this is a characteristic of most social movements, it is important that researchers learn the perspective also of people who do not participate since this may help to explain the future of a movement. Along these lines, Edelman teaches us that many social movements come and go rapidly and their

agendas, membership and tactics change significantly over time; one cannot talk about them as long-term, homogeneous entities. More than this, he specifies that most social movements are neither clear-cut successes nor all-out failures, over time only part of their agenda being fulfilled while some of their goals are left unmet. Given this, one may even be drawn to Tilly's warning that it is probably mistaken to think of a social movement as "a group of any kind" (1984:305). He, instead, focuses more exclusively on the interactions between movement leaders and officials around particular issues. Indeed, such points of contact are important to pay attention to, but I believe we need to examine the role of other constituents, and non-constituents, as illustrated below.

Analyzing the Meeting

As I noted above, the *UIP* meeting was not an isolated incident. There have been many examples of political activism and social movements among pensioners especially in recent years. In this section, I begin by presenting just a few examples from a couple different regions of Romania, my purpose being to illustrate that in the post-socialist era some retirees in many parts of the country have become very active politically, joining movements that seek to bring about change to their situation.

One illustrative example of political activism among pensioners comes from Arad, a city of approximately 180,000 located in western Romania. This city was the site of a protest in front of city hall by the County Pensioners' League (*LJP – Liga Județeană a Pensionarilor*), an organization that is structurally equivalent to and has similar goals as the *UIP* in Galați, in June 2000, when the Democratic Convention of Romania (the *CDR*, Constantinescu's party) was still in power but the Social Democrats were campaigning to

unseat them in national elections later that year. They went even further than the *UJP* did at the meeting I attended – the *LJP* presented city officials with a petition signed by its members that asked the government to address a number of issues by the end of September that year. It was a provocative letter showing that the *LJP* was not going to be modest in its demands; it attempted to get all that it could now that such direct action had become possible in Romania's newly democratic climate. The League asked that pensions be indexed to market prices so that the retired could manage the high cost of food and other necessities. They demanded that the government wipe out inequities in pension income, Dumitru's and other pensioners' stressor, by recalculating pensions. They called for the exoneration of low-income pensioners from taxation, asking that only retirement income that exceeded twice the average salary be taxed. They demanded that representatives of the retired community be allowed access to meetings held at the Health Insurance Department, and they insisted that the government compensate medications for pensioners as it had done in earlier years.

The League was not alone in this action, which also probably partly explains why its demands were so ambitious. At its side were members of the local branch of one of the most influential unions in the country, the National Confederation of Free Unions of Romania (*CNSLR - Confederația Națională a Sindcatelor Libere din România*). The leader of this union emphasized that the appeals made by the League were actually “rights” for which pensioners should not have to “beg.” And he went further, invoking the “Social Charter of Europe,” which includes the same “rights” for pensioners, reminding everyone that the Romanian government had failed to ratify the charter. The implication was that Romania was less European than some neighboring countries

because it did not meet the basic needs of its pensioner population, a powerful argument in a country yearning for European Union membership (N.A. 2000).

Inevitably, the *LJP*'s demands were not fully met by the September 2000 deadline. Not long thereafter, the *PSD* government that held power during much of my fieldwork was voted into office with the hope that it would reverse the downturn Romania was experiencing under the previous administration. Unsatisfied with the speed of reform under the *PSD*, by the following summer the *LJP* was again on the streets urging the government to address its concerns. Although they were more conservative this time in the demands they made, urging the government only to begin the process of recalculating pensions, the number of participants in the protest was double that of the previous year (N.A. 2001). Moreover, the protestors in Arad were not alone on that June day; similar demonstrations involving pensioners or workers with issues related to retirement were coordinated in many parts of the country on the same day. This included Galați, where workers in the metallurgical industry called attention to the problem of low income among people who had retired from the sector, one union leader publicly saying that "people don't get pensions; we just go from working to being dead" (Stancu and Luca 2001). Surely, the protests across the country that day were not entirely in unison; nonetheless, together they sent an explicit message to the powerful in Bucharest – the situation of pensioners remained intolerable and real change was mandatory.

Such political activism among pensioners continued well into the *PSD* administration as people felt little, if any, improvement in their everyday lives. For example, a large demonstration that brought together workers and pensioners was held in Bucharest in October 2003, a few months before I went into the field. In this instance,

about 8000 protesters marched on the streets of the capital in order to express their disillusionment over proposed increases in the cost of utilities and the planned enactment of a flat tax on people's income; they also let the government know that they were weary from living on monthly incomes of less than 100 euros. Although the number of participants was not outstanding, it was enough to provoke one national newspaper (*The Truth – Adevărul*) to editorialize that the *PSD* seemed to have lost its "traditional electorate" of state workers and pensioners (Nicolae 2003).

These are only a handful of vignettes of pensioner political activism in recent years, there being many other examples of such organizing I could present. My purpose here has not been to exhaustively catalog the social movements that have sprung up among pensioners in Romania, but rather to briefly illustrate that some pensioners in many parts of the country, not just those I observed at the *UIP* meeting in Galați, have used their own initiative to demand that the state listen to their concerns.

This change may be encouraging, but there remains a big question: has it really made a difference? As I have already suggested, my answer to this question is rather mixed. The reasons for this have much to do with a number of observations I made that were connected, or at least seemed to be connected, to the 2004 national election campaign. After the *PSD* experienced such staggering losses in the June 2004 local election and as the calendar moved onward to the national election, an array of concessions was extended to pensioners across Romania. They began with the launching of a medication compensation program on August 15, which allowed pensioners to purchase pharmaceuticals produced in Romania at a 90 percent discount. Foreign medications were also compensated at this rate when no domestically-produced variety of

a drug existed; otherwise, pharmaceuticals made outside of Romania had to be purchased at full rates.

At first, this program seemed like a major win for the retired, especially since I had so often heard pensioners complain about the cost of drugs they needed to treat illnesses. I quickly learned that some people were not quite satisfied with it, though. This included a retired fisherman living in the Danube Delta; I happened to be staying in his home during a short trip at the time that the compensation program began. Although he did not say whether he or his wife would benefit from it, he did observe a political calculation behind it, reminding me that Ceaușescu had made a similar move toward the very end of his regime in promising pensioners that he would raise their income – and look what happened to him, the fisherman seemed to imply. A family doctor characterized the program as “political” because it could not be sustained by the budget, predicting it would terminate shortly after the election. Even so, some pensioners did describe receiving temporary relief from the program and government statistics showed that a large number of people took advantage of it. Still, many people did not like the fact that foreign medications were not covered since they believed that they were more effective than domestic varieties. So the compensation program was clearly a very “mixed bag” for pensioners. Many people, not just the fisherman and the doctor, “knew” that it was a political maneuver, but they also gained some temporary relief from it even if they would have been even more comforted if the cost of all pharmaceuticals had been cut.

For the *PSD*, the compensation program was clearly an attempt at appeasing a very disgruntled pensioner electorate whose vote, now more than ever, was seen as

essential for the party's political survival. Posters popped up in central places in Galați showing the *PSD* candidate for president, Adrian Năstase, with an elderly man and woman and the words “we compensated medication 90% for pensioners” (“*Am compensat cu 90% medicamentele pentru pensionari*”) emblazoned on it. With this, it was clear that they wanted to ensure the pensioner vote in order to be reelected. One had reason to wonder, though, about how well the working-class of the city identified with the message since the people portrayed in the poster appeared middle-class.

Reinforcing this point was the announcement at about the same time that the compensation program was inaugurated that retirees would receive an increase in their pensions beginning the first of September. For many pensioners, this would mean a 9.46 percent increase since they would receive a 4 percent cost-of-living adjustment (*indexare*) upon which a 5.25 percent raise (*majorare*) would be added. Not everyone would get quite this much. People who retired on or after April 1, 2001, Dumitru's “Day of Deception,” received only the cost-of-living increase because their pensions had already been adjusted by the time of the legislation. In either case, the increase was very modest, providing someone with a pension of one million lei (\$30) at most 94,600 additional lei (less than \$3). Because of this, most people told me that it made only a fractional difference to them, but the increase nevertheless was greater than the periodic adjustments of 2 to 3 percent the government had been making and therefore it at least held a lot of symbolic value, again suggesting that the *PSD* was on the side of pensioners.

Then a month later another move was made by the *PSD* to win the votes of pensioners. The long anticipated correction of pension inequities, the so-called “recalculation of pensions” (“*recalcularea pensiilor*”), was finally begun on October 1.

Although as mentioned in chapter four the adjustments were to be fairly small and most people would not receive the increase for many months, the decision by the government to get the process going was good news to many pensioners. Therefore, it, too, involved a careful weighing of the electorate by the *PSD*. Believing that pensioners would not give them their vote automatically, they knew they had to offer some “goods,” and in this case the results were especially “real” since the adjustments would have both material and psychological consequences; not only would people have a bit more money to spend on essentials, but they could also relax knowing that their pensions were the same as those of other people who had done work similar to them.

On the same day that the government initiated the recalculation program yet another concession was made, although in this instance it applied only to the city of Galați and was available to everyone, not just pensioners: the price of a loaf of white bread was reduced from six to five thousand lei (\$0.18 to \$0.15). This may not seem like much, but it was actually one of the most powerful tools the *PSD* could use to shore up people’s support given both the symbolic importance of bread in Romania and the fact that it is a dietary staple. The fact that this was a political maneuver carried out at the local rather than national level indicated that the *PSD* was anxious that the historically reliable vote from Moldova was slipping away; more certain that they would do less well in other parts of the country, keeping Moldova on its side was particularly important. Expectedly, the *PSD* announced the reduction with a certain amount of fanfare, a city official letting the public know about the change with the president of a trade association representing bread producers at his side.

The concessions seemed to keep coming on that first of October. As already

mentioned, it was International Pensioners' Day and pensioners were treated to a free concert and had the opportunity to win a prized household appliance. This event was indeed candidly sponsored by the Social Democrats as one could see on the flyer announcing it, which showed a picture of Năstase, but they did more than just fund it, taking advantage of the mass gathering to directly show their support for pensioners. Dumitrescu, the *PSD* mayor, and Marius Necula, the *PSD* prefect, both made speeches honoring the elderly. These were backed up by a public appearance and a speech by a regional bishop, (*episcopul "Dunării de Jos"*) Casian Crăciun – a clever move by *PSD* officials since it meant that they were supported by the Romanian Orthodox church, a venerable institution in the eyes of many pensioners, as we have already seen in some of the ethnography presented above.

This still does not fully answer the question of whether it was social movement pressures or *PSD* electoral calculation that led to this series of concessions, however. Did pensioners win these benefits because they had spoken their minds at meetings like the one in Galați and had marched on the streets of Bucharest demanding change, or did the *PSD* grudgingly offer these concessions only because they worried that their chances at another mandate were fading away and they wanted to be sure that they would get enough votes to defeat their contenders? The answers to both parts of this question, in my opinion, are yes. I believe it did matter that the retired were putting their energy into letting political leaders know that there were limits to how much they would take, and if this were not recognized and if some measures were not taken to raise their standard of living, they would vote for the opposition. Public cries by pensioners, such as one made during the Bucharest protest in 2003 – “we swear, we swear, we will not vote for you

again” (“*Jurăm, jurăm să nu vă mai votăm*”) – did not fall on deaf ears, in other words. And such protests were taken even more seriously because pensioner demographics were rising, as shown in Appendix B. In 2004, people 50 years and older represented more than 31.4 percent of the population, an increase from 28.6 percent just six years earlier (Anuarul Statistic al României 2005b). Although not all of these people were pensioners, quite a few were – recall, for example, that Dumitru was around 50 and Raluca was 53 when they retired – or they were nearing retirement and therefore contemplating their upcoming lives as pensioners.

Also on the side of pensioners were quantitative studies published in Romania showing that older men and women were among the most disenchanting citizens because of their marginality. This included a biannual study, the Barometer of Public Opinion (*Barometrul de opinie publică*) by the Open Society Foundation (*Fundația pentru o Societate Deschisă*) that showed in October 2004 that only one percent of persons averaging 58 years old was satisfied with his or her income and that this group had the least trust of all age groups in the government, its leaders and in other contenders for office. A preliminary study by the Center of Urban and Regional Sociology (*Centrul de Sociologie Urbană și Regională*) meanwhile suggested that people who had retired early were among the most socially marginalized in Romania (Abraham 2000:21). And earlier research that sought to determine whether the people in Romania who were the most economically marginalized – including pensioners, according to the study – would be the most likely to abstain from voting concluded that there was no “significant connection” between the two; if anything it was the most well-to-do who were the most likely not to go to the polls during presidential elections (Câmpeanu 1993).

With this knowledge circulating about the sentiments and voting practices of pensioners, or near pensioners, it made sense that politicians wanted to enact policies, the effects of which pensioners would observe in their day-to-day lives; the electoral significance of the retired was just too important to ignore and, therefore, making real change in their lives became essential. Still, many of the concessions the *PSD* offered the retired were short-lived, suggesting that they were just “tricks” to ensure the vote of pensioners. It was obvious that the *PSD* was trying to attract elderly people’s votes partly with gestures that looked good and held symbolic weight but the substance of which one had to question. Some were on to this maneuvering: I recall overhearing Victoria Dobre say to another woman at the recreational center just days before the national election that “they give to us, they give to us, they give to us and, then, it’s over!” (“*Ne dau, ne dau, ne dau, și kaput*”) meaning that the “offerings” from the *PSD* would be no more once the election had ended.

But Victoria was not entirely correct. The pension recalculation process, for example, continued such that by the summer of 2005 pensioners who had retired before 1990 had begun to receive their increases. The medication compensation program, however, did not go on as it had been “planned for,” as I have already shown. By the summer of 2005, pensioners were already struggling to gain access to the increasingly limited supply of reduced-priced medications. There is, then, an important theoretical point about the relationship between states and social movements that comes out of this ethnographic example from Romania. States, even increasingly democratic ones such as Romania, do measurably define the sort of social movement activity they allow and they do significantly determine the influence that such activity has on policy. As Calhoun

points out, states shape the “field of social movements” within their domain (op. cit.:387). But the state – and here I am referring explicitly to states eager to show others their democratic credentials, which is the case for Romania – is not fully determinative of what social movements can do and what they can achieve. Often they can achieve desired ends even if political leaders would prefer different outcomes. In the end, then, I argue for a dialectical understanding of the relationship between democratic states and social movements, the former maintaining the greater power to shape the relationship, but the latter also managing to occasionally win through well-organized tactics that draw attention to their concerns. This theorizing is applicable to a fledgling democracy such as Romania. No, pensioners did not always get what they wanted in their battles with the state; more often than not, they failed. Nevertheless, success, some of it quite substantive, came their way sometimes because they had organized and pressured state authorities.

The *PSD* was certainly not alone in maneuvering for the pensioner vote. The other contenders for office knew that their support was vital to gaining power. Unlike the *PSD*, they did not have the means to offer concessions to retirees and, therefore, instead relied heavily on rhetoric to attract pensioners to their parties. As I have already discussed in chapter five, *PNL-PD*, the coalition that ultimately won the national election, put a lot of effort into enticing pensioners by drawing attention to the “corrupt” nature of the *PSD* administration, arguing that it was infiltrated with the “mafia.” It was partly because of this that pensioners and many working people in Romania were poor, they argued. If the *PNL-PD* were brought into office, they would end the control of government by criminal networks, which would help to raise the standard of living across

the country. Notably, in all their talk of corruption there was, though, little reference to the everyday petty crime that many pensioners worried about, as shown in chapter four. I suspect this resulted from the relative power of rhetoric about street crime to attract people's attention. Even if such crime mattered to pensioners and they did feel insecure in their travels outside the home because of its potential, it was the "big" corruption that the *PNL-PD* believed would capture more people's attention, especially since they tied it to the generalized poverty the population confronted.

Indeed, eradicating poverty was another major theme the *PNL-PD* developed in order to attract the pensioner vote. They specifically addressed the importance of recalculating pensions so that retirees would receive the income that was rightly theirs. They pledged to raise pensions across the board, in one campaign advertisement asserting that their program included increasing pension income to an average 110 euro (or around four million lei) monthly. They argued that they could achieve this not only by restraining corruption but also through a series of economic policy changes, such as introducing the flat tax. Furthermore, they insured voters that they would win appeal in the West, thereby bringing more foreign direct investment to the country.

Similar rhetoric was used by another major contender in the national election, the far-right Greater Romania Party (*PMR – Partidul România Mare*), headed by the eccentric Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a former poet to Nicolae Ceaușescu. They, too, focused a great deal on the "corruption" of the ruling party, underscoring the need for a fight against the problem by strengthening, and providing greater independence to, the judiciary. They said that they were on the side of retirees, making promises to double pensions and to wipe out the debt of people with low income. One of the major

differences between their message and those of the other major contenders was, however, a moral undertone through which they suggested that if they were elected to high office, Romania would regain its ethical balance. Because of this in particular, some people, such as my landlady's retired father Gheorghe, were drawn to the *PMR*, believing that the party would straighten out the disorderly conditions of post-socialism.

In the December 2004 runoff between *PSD*'s Năstase and *PNL-PD*'s Băsescu, Băsescu won with 51.2 percent of the vote to Năstase's 48.7 percent. On the surface, this suggests that the *PNL-PD*'s rhetoric about corruption and its promise to raise pensioners' income had been more successful in attracting the votes of retirees than the *PSD*'s half-hearted concessions. The results show, however, that people over 55 voted in far greater numbers for Năstase than for Băsescu (63.5 vs. 36.5 percent), while the young and the middle-aged were the ones who voted less for the Social Democrats than for the coalition, 55.9 percent of people 18 to 30 voting for Băsescu and 44.1 percent voting for Năstase; 52 percent of people 31 to 55 voting for Băsescu and 48 percent voting for Năstase (N.A. 2004). I do not believe that this means the *PNL-PD* had failed to appeal to pensioners with their talk of corruption; my everyday encounters with the retired made it clear that they were very concerned about the problem and more generally about moral decay, as I illustrated in chapter five. Instead, it was the mix of concessions and *PSD*'s own rhetoric that pensioners would be forgotten by the business-oriented *PNL-PD* if it were to come to power that helped to keep pensioners in the Social Democratic camp. It was no surprise, then, that Năstase took up a theme from the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign in conceding the election to Băsescu: "There are two Romanias," he said. One is "urban" and "awaiting opportunity rather than support from the state," and the

other is “rural, with elderly people and poor people who need help...to survive” (Drăgotescu 2004).

The Activism Continues

Political activism and social movements involving pensioners continued after the new regime came to power since it did not succeed in improving the lives of older men and women to any measurable degree either. For example, a demonstration was planned by the *UJP* of Galați for July 2005 to again call attention to the plight of pensioners. It was called off, however, because of flooding in many parts of the country that spring and summer. According to Doina Ene, the woman who rallied support for the *UJP* meeting in 2004, the *UJP* decided to postpone the demonstration since it seemed inappropriate in light of how much people had lost in the flooding. In February 2006, when I was not in the field, the time had again become ripe for some pensioners in Galați to show their strength to the government. Approximately 500 pensioners held an unapproved protest in front of the Prefect’s Office in Galați in order to draw attention to the continued impoverishment within their ranks. The leader of the protest, Cristea Toader, announced that the group was planning to organize itself into a movement called “The Association of Impoverished Danubian Pensioners” (“*Asociația Pensionarilor Săraci Dunărea*”) and would carry out another protest two weeks later (Mandița 2006a). In early March, they followed through on their plans, staging a march and demonstration of more than 1000 pensioners and supporters. The event was substantial enough to cause leaders to fulfill one of their demands, a meeting with authorities in Bucharest (Mandița 2006b).

Impressed by this activism, I returned to Galați in June 2006 to learn more about it. It turned out that no one I knew had participated in the protests, but everyone had an opinion about them. Several people were very cynical that protests could ever result in positive change. Adrian Tomescu, for example, described the leaders of the group going to Bucharest as “oxen” but returning as “cows” to Galați (“*s-au dus boi și s-au întors vaci*,” he said) because few of their demands were fulfilled. Still, he conceded that there had been some improvement in pensioners’ access to compensated medications. Lenuța Moldovan, who was still collecting *pomană* offerings at the cemetery, told me that the protests were “in vain,” an opinion shared by another woman there. To them it all seemed like a complete waste of time. And Elena and Constanța Iorga said that they were outraged that the state had used aggressive tactics to quell the protests, shoving and knocking down older men and women. Only Dumitru Ungureanu and Rodica Dragomir expressed true appreciation for the efforts of the protesters and believed that lasting, positive change would ultimately come from their activism. A small sign of this, in addition to the improved access to compensated medications, was a cost-of-living increase all pensioners would receive in September of that year.

It seemed important to try to talk to people who had been directly involved in the protests. Unfortunately, no one in my network seemed personally familiar with anyone who had joined in the street demonstration although by no means did I ask everyone I knew about this because I realized it was a sensitive topic, and I feared that I would make at least some people uneasy by pursuing such information. An opportunity to possibly meet some of the participants, or at the very least to observe their activism directly, came about when a demonstration was planned that June by a group calling itself “The

Pensioners' Alliance of Galați" (*APG – Alianța Pensionarilor din Galați*). This was not a new social movement; some of the same people who had organized the winter protests that year and had considered using the other name noted immediately above had organized behind the demonstration. I attended the rally, which was held at a monument dedicated to "The Heroes of December," that is to people who had died during the 1989 revolution. About fifty people participated, all but one of whom were men. They called out demands for pension increases and improved access to healthcare services. At one point a woman provocatively kissed a photograph of Ceaușescu that she held. Since the media was widely present at the event, I decided only to observe the protest, and, although I did not directly speak with anyone involved, I am convinced that I was witnessing the unwillingness of at least some pensioners to accept their reduced standard of living quietly. And in the end, a meeting they demanded with the city's prefecture was arranged, three representatives of the group being invited on that day to speak with several public officials.

Conclusion

The *UJP* meeting with the mayor in March 2004 was but one example of activism by pensioners in the post-socialist era that was meant to call attention to, and to improve, their standard of living. Stressed by the dramatic changes in their lives since 1989, pensioners showed with this meeting and with the other organized efforts they have carried out in recent years that they will not quietly accept their poverty or just cope as best they can. Instead, they have built social movements through which they have elevated their concerns to a level that political leaders in Romania cannot entirely ignore

if they wish to retain power and to gain points with observant EU officials, especially given the increasing demographic weight of this sector of the population.

Their efforts have brought about positive change even if in some cases only temporarily, as we saw with the medication compensation program, and even if a careful political calculation on the part of leaders rather clearly lay behind some of the successes of pensioners. And their organized efforts will carry on. I expect an increasing sense of political power among retirees in Romania, who will continue to attempt to influence the state through social movements and political activism. Pensioners will be a political force over the next generation with which the state will have to contend.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

When I returned to Galați in June 2006 I did more than learn about pensioner political mobilization. I also met up with many of my informants to see how they had been doing during the year that I was away. This included Rodica Dragomir, whom I had first met more than two years earlier. She invited me one evening to her home, where she served *țuică* (plum brandy) from her home town and a few treats. Our conversation began with Rodica telling me about a number of festivities in which she had participated in recent months. These included a party at the Foundation, a gathering with her children and a gala for pensioners. There was even another event she had wanted to attend but decided against going because of her broken arm, the cast for which she would later remove. All of this news from Rodica about social activity, and the enthusiastic manner in which she shared it, gave me the impression that life was much better for her than when I had last been in Galați. She seemed quite well and less stressed, observations I shared with her.

With these remarks, Rodica's words, tone and facial expressions changed as if day had become night. Things were not better, she said, since she still received a pension that was impossible to live on. It now came to 1.7 million lei a month, which at the exchange rate meant she was earning roughly \$60 a month, nearly double the amount she was receiving when I first met her, but by 2006 the dollar was much weaker than the Romanian leu and prices had gone up such that now one million monthly went to pay her building maintenance, electricity, phone and other utilities and the remaining money was for food and medications. Just getting by, in other words, was still very challenging for

her even if her children continued to try to support her by inviting her over for meals once in a while. “They, too, have their difficulties,” she reminded me and as a result could do only so much for her. What Rodica was telling me in all of this was how little her standard of living had changed since I had last seen her. Yes, she took pleasure in Foundation and other festivities, but she was still scraping by on a very meager income and she continued to watch her children work hard to achieve even a modest standard of living.

This dissertation has explored the lives of working-class pensioners in Galați, Moldova, such as Rodica. Marginalized by their class, age and location in one of the least developed regions in a country with a standard of living lower than most of its European neighbors, they have been among the most negatively affected by the transformation from a state socialist economy to a neoliberal capitalist one since the 1989 revolution. The shrinkage of the social safety net, the disruption of economic stability, the dispersal of kin for work and the breakdown of community relations that have been features of this transformation have all had a particularly severe impact on older, working-class people in Moldova because of their long-term exposure to socialism, their age and their poverty. And among these pensioners, women have been especially hard hit, the post-socialist transformation being a gendered process that has left even greater numbers of older women in poverty than men.

As a result of these changes, I showed that pensioners in Galați regularly describe feeling “stress” from a number of material circumstances, including the high cost of food, utilities and medication, the prices of which never seem to stop rising, and several social conditions, such as the absence of their children from their day-to-day lives because they

have left the city for work in other places or because they too are stressed. Additional troubling circumstances were the rise in crime and talk about crime, the need to wait for many basic services, the high cost of ceremonial obligations and the uncertainty of policy changes generated by the state. And more than any of these, it is encounters with the healthcare system (beyond, that is, waiting for services) that debatably create the greatest stress in the lives of pensioners, since these often involve having to make payments that the retired are ill-equipped to handle. All of this stress from Romania's capitalist transformation is changing the way pensioners, and other working-class people, explain the health conditions from which they suffer; more and more they view stress as a central cause of the illnesses they and others experience.

The discussion of stress from encounters with the healthcare system did not end here. I pointed out that although the retired chronically experience anxiety over the "requirement" to pay doctors and nurses for their services, most were very forgiving in part because they were aware of the generally low salaries of healthcare professionals and because of their long-term familiarity with doctors and nurses after a lifetime of encounters with the socialized medical system. And in that system it was common for people to pay for services in kind even if the payments were not as burdensome as many say they are today. People were already used to the practice, in other words. This discussion of the ambivalent evaluation of doctors and nurses by pensioners and some of their younger family members opened the door to a description and analysis of the moral commentary one does find among pensioners against the newly rich and powerful. In contrast to the generally forgiving stance they take toward healthcare providers, pensioners express antagonism toward people who have accumulated wealth in the post-

socialist era because, they believe, their wealth has resulted from corrupt activity. This attitude made them somewhat susceptible to political rhetoric about corruption in the 2004 election campaign since in many cases they also believed that their impoverishment was the result of the corruption and immorality of the newly rich.

The dissertation continued with discussion of the ways in which pensioners strategize to counteract the effects of the stress epidemic. I gave many ethnographic descriptions of the coping mechanisms older men and women in Galați use to get by, including, for example, “stealing” water; seeking out new forms of social support; complaining and exaggerating; field gleaning and fishing; returning to work in the formal economy or working in the informal sector; moving to a rural area; borrowing money, pawning or selling household goods; going to the cemetery or churches to await handouts of *pomană* goods; and “begging” in markets and other public spaces. Although these strategies certainly show the steadfastness of pensioners in post-socialist Romania, and more generally counter prosaic beliefs in western thought about the “passive elderly,” I underscored that many of them in fact exacerbate the very problem they set out to reduce – they bring more stress into pensioners’ lives.

The penultimate chapter explored the involvement of pensioners in political activism and social movements to bring about change in their lives. I emphasized that the organizing of pensioners was an indication of the increasing democratization of Romanian government and society; although the country has some distance to travel before fully consolidating democracy, the fact that direct political action is so widespread today indicates that this process is clearly underway. I argued that it made a difference in their condition, even if only a minor one and despite the fact that political leaders’

opportunism played a major role in concessions won by pensioners in the run-up to, and indeed after, the 2004 election. The growing demographic of the retired cannot be ignored by political elites, but one wonders how much they can win by their activism or whether they will mostly just remain pawns in the periodic game of politicians to retain, or to win, power, with no really substantial or long-lasting change in their standard of living taking place. The continued impoverishment of Rodica and other pensioners I know in Galați seems to suggest that this may be the case for the foreseeable future, especially as the “emerging market” in Romania feels the effects of the global economic crisis of late 2008. And this is likely to be particularly true in Moldova, where a weaker economy than in some other regions of Romania has a direct impact on the quality of life, especially among the now marginalized working class.

This takes us back to the cemetery in Galați, a place where so many of the changes since the end of socialism have played out. As I noted, I returned there, too, during my June 2006 stay and found Lenuța still waiting for *pomană* from visitors. She remained distrustful of other pensioners who came there, telling me that another woman with whom we both conversed was not a good person. This reminded me of her worry about being mugged by culprits roaming about the lots. Indeed, the cemetery was not the place it had been under socialism. Instead of being a place where families gathered to honor their dead, increasingly it had become an arena where conflict and tension prevailed. And in the minds of many of my informants soon it would become their new “home” where they would be forsaken by just about everyone – their long-departed kin, their disrupted communities and their once supportive state – except the prowling thieves.

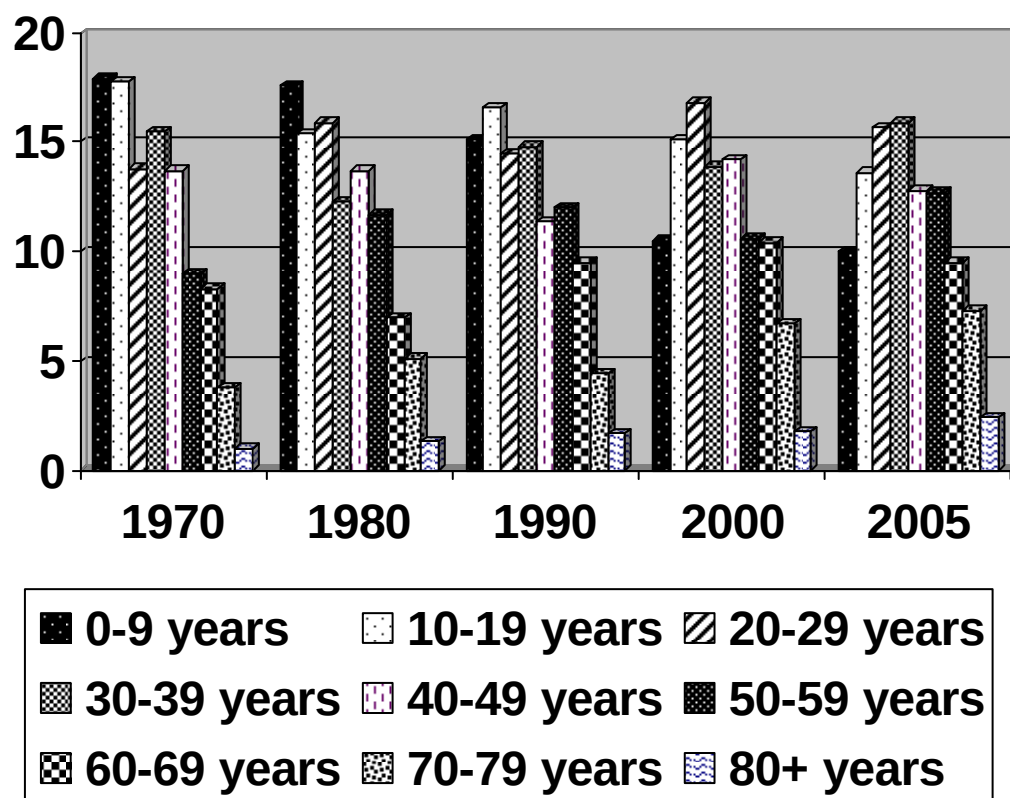
This dissertation is a call to reverse this possibility by bringing forsaken pensioners like those I came to know back in. In other words, it is not enough to simply record the downturn experienced by retirees in post-socialist Romania – revenue and human resources should be directed to improving their lives. Only with such economic and social policy can the conditions illustrated here become a distant chapter in Romania’s post-socialist history. Until then, material poverty among the elderly working-class in Moldova will persist, and they will continue in many cases to live torn from the social ties important to them.

Appendices

Appendix A: Principal Informants

Name	Gender	Age in 2004	Occupation
Apostol, Nicoleta	F	85	seamstress
Banciu, Cosmina	F	78	homemaker
Barbu, Raluca	F	52	textile industry worker
Câmpeanu, Alexandra	F	77	homemaker
Cristea, Ion	M	25	unemployed – sought work abroad
Dinescu, Ana	F	68	food management
Dobre, Iulian	M	32	abroad: construction, agriculture Galați: semi-skilled worker at <i>Sidex</i>
Dobre, Serghei	M	69	irrigation construction; furniture factory
Dobre, Victoria	F	67	raised four children, farmed, gardened, built house, performed domestic work
Dragomir, Rodica	F	75	raised three children, gardened, performed domestic work
Florescu, Mihaela	F	68	doorkeeper
Iorga, Constanța	F	38	assistant at NGOs; former grocery store clerk; entered government service
Iorga, Cosmin	M	80	public administration
Iorga, Elena	F	75	chemical works
Leonte, Sorina	F	67	accountant
Maniu, Vasile	M	75	collective farmer; mayor; fitter at <i>Sidex</i>
Marinescu, Laura	F	60	accountant
Moldovan, Lenuța	F	71	cook
Munteanu, Ștefan	M	68	train operator
Niculescu, Daciana	F	44	public utility operator
Niculescu, Mihnea	M	37	import/export administration at <i>Sidex</i> ; similarly employed in Timișoara
Niculescu, Gheorghe	M	70	stoker
Nicușor, Iordache	M	65	mechanical engineering at <i>Sidex</i>
Popa, Margareta	F	35	public administration
Popescu, Radu	M	53	market vendor; sought work abroad in industrial manufacturing
Roman, Costică	M	41	dock worker; worked abroad in shipping
Șerban, Cezar	M	40	mechanical engineer at <i>Sidex</i>
Stan, Georgeta	F	69	cooperative farming
Stănescu, Grigore	M	36	administrator at <i>Sidex</i>
Tomescu, Felicia	F	70	homemaker
Tomescu, Adrian	M	75	plumber
Ungureanu, Dumitru	M	52	electrician

Appendix B: Demographic Structure of Romania by Age Group (1970-2005)
 Sources: *Anuar de Statistică Sanitară 2003* and *Anuarul Statistic al României 2005b*



note: figures on left of chart indicate percentage of population

Appendix C:
Morbidity in Romania by Disease Class (per 100,000 inhabitants)

Type of Disease	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2003
Infectious diseases	5,130	5,470	2,840	3,729	3,330	4,260
Tumors	120	129	181	162	180	210
Illness of the endocrine system (e.g., diabetes, hypo- and hyperthyroidism, Addison's disease, Cushing's syndrome)	428	586	354	536	937	1,197
Blood disorders (e.g., anemia, hemophilia)	404	477	484	502	615	660
Mental health illnesses	507	545	752	671	600	761
Diseases of the nervous system	4,543	4,518	4,848	3,974	3,565	4,411
Circulatory diseases	1,311	1,233	1,660	2,263	3,024	3,064
Respiratory diseases (e.g., asthma, bronchitis, emphysema)	33,537	33,274	28,868	32,797	30,083	33,742
Digestive diseases	17,985	20,812	18,735	14,491	6,090	7,635
Diseases of the genitor-urinary system (e.g., kidney disease, endometriosis, prostate illnesses)	1,823	1,929	2,564	3,202	3,395	4,319
Birth complications	307	225	1,594	345	145	103
Integumentary disorders (e.g., dermatitis, psoriasis)	3,727	3,699	4,188	4,335	3,329	3,611
Diseases of the muscular-skeletal system (e.g., osteoporosis, osteoarthritis)	1,329	1,480	2,477	3,424	3,380	4,432
Congenital abnormalities	16	13	15	14	31	22
Diseases of perinatal origin (e.g., fetal alcohol syndrome)	8	1	29	8	5	6
Unknown etiology ¹	---	---	712	298	285	561
Trauma (unspecified) ² and poisonings	1,405	1,228	3,328	2,241	1,669	2,040

Source: *Anuar de Statistică Sanitară 2003* (2004:140-141)

¹ No data available on diseases of "unknown etiology" for 1970 or 1980.

² Although unspecified, this category almost certainly includes accidents, falls, attempted suicides and abuse.

Appendix D:
Mortality in Romania by Disease Class (total number of deaths per year)

Cause of Death	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2003
Tuberculosis	3,741	830	1,602	2,560	2,130	2,237
Infectious diseases (excluding TB)	3,894	1,571	1,159	1,094	1,041	819
Tumors	24,965	29,976	32,984	37,539	41,290	43,676
Illnesses of the endocrine system and blood disorders	1,012	1,502	2,827	2,120	2,096	2,362
Mental illness and diseases of the nervous system	2,279	2,798	3,473	4,057	2,855	2,935
Diseases of the circulatory system, including, e.g., cerebral vascular accident, hypertension, myocardial infarction and angina	92,785	130,543	145,516	166,958	157,448	165,625
Respiratory illnesses, including pneumonia and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	33,604	30,342	22,588	17,185	14,824	14,058
Diseases of the digestive system	7,296	10,079	11,672	15,474	14,349	15,532
Diseases of the genitor- urinary system	3,309	3,587	3,411	2,929	2,388	2,501
Obstetrical complications	497	527	263	113	77	65
Skin and tissue disorders and musculoskeletal diseases	313	284	320	198	137	119
Congenital abnormalities	1,759	2,337	1,762	1,136	1,055	1,079
Peri-natal complications	4,507	2,482	1,649	1,452	1,450	1,185
Unknown	504	125	100	1,018	268	259
Accidents, poisonings, trauma (unspecified) ³	12,693	14,893	17,760	17,839	14,412	14,123

Source: *Anuar de Statistică Sanitară 2003* (2004:28-29)

³ As in the data regarding morbidity, this category almost certainly includes suicides and drownings.

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