

## Research Seminars

### RETHINKING FIELDWORK: RESEARCHING FOOD IN THE AFTERMATH OF LOCKDOWN

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#### Abstract

*The article raises questions related to field research methodology in a specific context. The authors take into consideration mainly the context of uncertainty, generated by Covid-19 pandemics which forced them to reshape the field research methodology as previously known and commonly used by Romanian ethnologists. The authors provide a brief presentation and analysis of the first steps done as part of what later would become a larger field experience in terms of investigating Romanian food heritage. It relies on five examples represented by five interviews conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews that compose the case study have a special value. The negotiation to set up the meetings, the arguments of each of the parties, the conditions in which the discussions were organized are all angles that deserve to be discussed as source of what we might call ethnological motivation. What can determine the people, members of a specific culture, to share their knowledge and their life experience about a certain topic, when the very act of speaking might be a dangerous one? In each of these examples, the informant was responsive when informed that we were conducting research related to local traditions, specific family cuisine, without producing television shows, and without overexposing themselves. We notice the existence of a 'need to tell', a real duty 'to tell relevant information about one's own culture', a vector that characterizes communities just as, for the researcher, there is a work ethic which implies 'his obligation to make all necessary efforts to find out information'.*

**Keywords:** Romanian ethnology; Romanian Food Heritage; field research; Banat; ethnology in time of crisis.

#### 1. Contexts: (the) project, (the) theme, (the) region

The present article explores a field experience, part of a complex research carried out in the context of a larger project aiming to document specific elements of the Romanian food heritage.<sup>1</sup> Project focused on an important cultural heritage theme often neglected by

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<sup>1</sup> The institutional framework of the research was possible related to the financing, between October 2020 – November 2022 by Romanian Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding, of an *experimental-demonstrative* project named *Colecție digitală a patrimoniului alimentar românesc și transfer spre societate / Romanian Digital Repository on Food: Turning Heritage Knowledge Towards Society* (acronym FOODie). The project's budget, its

scientists<sup>2</sup> and aimed to approach it in a national context, through research covering the entire territory of Romania, including communities belonging to other various ethnic groups. The field research was designed following the criteria of research campaigns, considering a regional distribution meant to cover the main ethnographic and historical areas inhabited by Romanians.

The topic of food as a research subject was largely overlooked by the Romanian scientific community. Even though today it becomes a frequent topic mainly due to media intervention, the subject of food as research topic is almost a new one for the Romanian ethnology while Western ethnology addressed this subject for a long time, from a multidisciplinary perspective. This situation is the result of several aspects among which different cultural policies encouraging the capitalization of local resources and / or local heritage. After the occurrence of the first ethnographic studies at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Romania, the subject of food and dietary practices was treated only occasionally. In general, it was ritual food that piqued the interest of researchers, who showed little interest in everyday nourishment. Let us not forget the communist period during which almost all research on cultural and ritual practices related to food were prohibited. In addition, shortages of all kinds, including the lack of products and the introduction by the state authorities of the *alimentație rațională*, ‘*rational nutrition*’, have also undermined the emergence of food as a subject of reflection. In the 1990s, after the fall of communism, the field of Romanian ethnology was redefined and new issues such as food heritage have started to emerge, but without being fully developed. In addition, the past years have facilitated several fieldworks on this subject, carried out by a wide range of persons, from journalists to chefs. The still existing gap between Romanian and Western ethnology in terms of food research underlines the relevance of the research we have done.

We started the research in Banat, the nearest region in terms of spatial accessibility. Banat is a cross-border region currently situated on the administrative territories of Romania, Serbia and, to a lesser extent, on the territory of Hungary. As a result of its history, the main characteristic of Banat is its multiculturalism, which led to the creation here of a particular cultural landscape. In addition, we have a large field research experience in this region where we have carried out a series of thematic research, mostly occasioned by European fundings dedicated to rural and remote areas, especially for cross-border ones.

The research began in 2020, several months after the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the restrictive provisions related to travelling and human interaction a significant part of human activities considered as being *non-essential* were interrupted, postponed, cancelled and/or reshaped. Certainly, ethnographic field research was one of those endeavours, similar to other research initiatives that were not initially focused on finding solutions for addressing the pandemic.

## **2. Case studies: informant(s), interaction(s), raised issue(s)**

The development of our research was placed from the beginning under the sign of a paradox. On the one hand, the authorities had intensely limited mobility and face to face interactions, while on the other hand it was obvious that collecting information about food was involving field research which supposed travelling from one place to another and human

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research activities and responsibilities were shared between the Consortium partners, under the coordination of the West University of Timisoara.

<sup>2</sup> For a better understanding of the rather marginal position that the study of food occupied in Romanian ethnology see Hedeșan & Timoșe-Mocanu (2021).

interaction. This is a common and priority practice not only of Romanian ethnology<sup>3</sup>, but also of ethnology as a discipline. According to this approach the field research is a primary, incipient stage of the ethnological study, being, for more than a century, *a sine qua non* method of this scientific paradigm. Studying the history of its configuration and canonization, Mondher Kilani observed that: ‘In the paradigm inaugurated by Malinowski, the argument of self-referentiality (the *I was there*) becomes one of the pillars of the authority of the new anthropology’<sup>4</sup> (Kilani, 1987, p. 41: our translation). As the name suggests, the *field* indicates the existence of a space to which the researcher is heading precisely to achieve as much observations as possible, to record and later submit them to his reflection and interpretation:

First of all, the anthropologist has a piece of field that he has chosen for both scientific and personal reasons, where he will stay for a certain number of months or years. In the field he learns a culture, a way of thinking, he interacts with women and men, makes discoveries, experiments with errors, collects data, develops initial syntheses, formulates hypotheses. At the end of his field work, he returns home with various objects, ready to be thought about and processed using concepts, technical words and theoretical models within the framework of a monographic text<sup>5</sup> (Kilani, 1994, p. 45: our translation).

Faced with this doubly constraining context, we opted for a middle ground. We decided to conduct some field research, selecting destinations that could be reached in one day, thereby minimizing human interaction. Obviously, this solution was not ideal either because, in attempting to mediate between the two extremes, the method actually violates both criteria: it minimizes the danger of the pandemic without offering, in compensation, a full development of field research as practiced before.

Fully aware of these disadvantages, we have conducted five interviews in the spring of 2021, more precisely in the first months after the beginning of the anti-Covid-19 vaccination campaign, i.e.:

- February 7, 2021: Nicoleta Ivan, 59 years old, Bocșa Română, Caraș-Severin County (school pedagogue; she produces and delivers confectionery and pastry for acquaintances and friends);
- February 27, 2021: Maria Merhau, 59 years old, Gârnic, Caraș-Severin County (owner of tourist guest house; she cooks following a traditional manner which promotes the use of ecological products, introduced in the menu by her daughter in law, originally from the Czech Republic);
- March 27, 2021: Mărioara Sârbu and Ana Boier, 83 years and 72 years old, Uzdin, Middle Banat District, Serbia (housewives, members of the *Asociația Bunicuțele din Uzdin*, ‘The Grandmothers from Uzdin Association’, which carries out a series of cultural activities oriented towards the preservation of the cultural heritage, especially of the intangible one);

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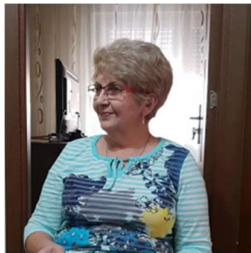
<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussions on this subject, with references mainly to the interwar period see Rostas (2003); for the communist period see Hedeșan (2008): “[...] fieldwork was promoted as a cornerstone of a major part of Romanian social research from the very beginning” (Hedeșan, 2008, p. 21).

<sup>4</sup> Source text: “Dans le paradigme inauguré par Malinowski, l’argument de l’auto-référentialité (le j’y étais) devient un des piliers de l’autorité de la nouvelle anthropologie”.

<sup>5</sup> Source text: “L’anthropologue possède en tout premier un terrain qu’il s’est choisi pour des raisons aussi bien scientifiques que personnelles, où il va séjourner un certain nombre des mois ou d’années. Sur le terrain il fait l’apprentissage d’une culture, d’une mode de pensée, il interagit avec les femmes et avec les hommes, fait des découvertes, expérimente des erreurs, recueille des données, élabore des premières synthèses, formule des hypothèses. Au terme de son travail sur le terrain, il revient chez lui avec divers objets, prêt à être pensés et traités aux moyens de concepts, de mots techniques et de modèles théoriques dans le cadre d’un texte monographique.”

- May 19, 2021: Mariana Cotolan and Florin Cotolan, 53 years old and 57 years old, Belinț, Timiș County (local producers, vegetable suppliers for food markets from Timisoara);
- June 2, 2021: Mărioara Fanu, 65 years old, Sârbova, Timiș (retired teacher, connoisseur of local culinary practices).

All five interviews, each prepared through numerous discussions, were experienced with maximum intensity by both us, the researchers, and by our informants. All these interactions were preceded by the long break we were all forced to take from free, uncensored social interactions due to the pandemic and which had already generated a state of permanent anxiety. However, all these meetings took place for different reasons. In some cases, a reliable mediator facilitated the meeting by emphasizing the necessity of such field research, while in others, some of the interlocutors had already received doses of the anti-Covid-19 vaccine and saw these discussions as true exercises to return to normal life. Additionally, one of the interviews was conducted remotely via video conference. Nevertheless, the family of one of the informants was negationist, considering the pandemic a mystification and sequentially ignoring the danger of meeting other persons. Below, we will attempt to summarize in more detailed context and content sheets these five interviews which represented both the debut of our field research on Romanian food heritage prompted by FOODie project and helped us to regain the field in the aftermath of lockdown.



[Photo 1 Nicoleta Ivan, photo taken during the interview]<sup>6</sup>

As previously mentioned, the first FOODie field research was conducted on February 7, 2021. Simultaneously, the discussion we had on that Sunday marked the beginning of research related to the pandemic period. It was a brief trip to the small town of Bocșa, approximately one hour away from Timișoara, organized and conducted with great caution. We proceeded only after our informant's son, who facilitated the discussion, assured us that his mother had already received the recently approved vaccine. We knew in advance that Nicoleta Ivan is passionate about cooking, especially about baking, and that she is occasionally preparing different desserts for various small parties such as birthdays, or meetings of small groups of friends. She welcomed us with enthusiasm, with her recipe notebook at hand, her childhood memories revived. A serving table full of dishes prepared especially for us was to be found in the middle of her very narrow living room. Each of these three elements – the memories, the recipe notebook, the food – represent different forms of relating to food and its meanings. Nicoleta Ivan is an excellent cook, an exceptional baker more precisely, a storyteller prepared to share her knowledge and to speak about her life experience. Always eager to delve into various topics and share extensively, she crafted several unique stories related to food, each capable of standing on its own.

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<sup>6</sup> PHOTO DISCLAIMER: all the photos included in the article were taken during the aforementioned interviews, with the consent of the interviewed persons. The photos are part of the Research Center for Heritage and Anthropology (RHeA) archive, FOODie collection.

Her story began, like a real-life story, with the evocation of her childhood in her home village, Valeapai, a small village lost among the hills of Banat. More than half a century ago, in this village, several women including Nicoleta's grandmother and great-grandmother performed semi-professional roles designed to produce ritual or semi-ritual food for the community. Our informant evoked two such roles. The first is that of the woman who prepared the ritual bread for the liturgy or for funerals (*prescurăreasă*). It was the role that her great-grandmother had for years inside this small community. The second role was illustrated through the image of another old woman that Nicoleta Ivan remembers with nostalgia, mama Ica, which played the role of the village cook that prepared food and cakes for parties, especially for weddings (*gătătoare*). The passion and knowledge that Nicoleta Ivan possesses today largely stem from her semi-formal childhood education, when these skilled women understood her interest and let her follow them while they worked. 'You should just sit here and observe, my dear...'<sup>7</sup> is a formula repeated several times during the meeting, always emphasizing the love with which the last professionals of rural culinary traditions tried to pass on their *savoir faire* to the next generation represented here by Nicoleta.

Being the inheritor of this knowledge, Nicoleta Ivan has somewhat relocated the mission of her ancestors from the world of the village to that of the small town(s). Basically, her passion for baking when required by her friends or acquaintances is the adaptation of a traditional role in a new context, for a new society which aims to be modern. In other words, in terms of an existing social framework, it is obvious that there is a demand in the market for high-quality desserts made in a "homemade" style, particularly for small gatherings organized in the region's small towns. This demand is fulfilled by a series of semi-professional bakers such as our informant. When it comes to her activity as a baker, Nicoleta Ivan refers to two different historical periods which are in direct connection with her private life. On the one hand, she relates to the cooking traditions of a remote village in the middle of the last century, but, on the other hand, she refers to the last years of Romanian communism, when sweets in particular especially in Banat tried to copy models from famous Romanian big cities bakeries or, in case of communities living close to the Romanian western border, even models existing in foreign bakeries.

One of the keys to success that our informant discovered during her childhood is related to the responsible use of ingredients, which is directly connected to the respect that needs to be shown to others. Perhaps the most memorable expression from the interview with Nicoleta Ivan, a true criterion not only in the preparation of desserts but in food in general, would be: 'I would like to add something else, madam: when you cook, you never skimp. But, above all, you never throw away anything.'<sup>8</sup> Being at the same time a criterion related to the sustainable use of ingredients and a quality requirement, this attitude is mandatory mostly when cooking for various social events. Our informant's conclusion that no economy is ever made for moments of social relevance, but, at the same time, that nothing is thrown away highlights a particular friction. It is the tension between the tendency to underline the importance of a family, its power through food<sup>9</sup>, on the one hand, and the respect for resources in a relatively poor society, on the other.

The second person we talked to is Maria Merhaud, from Gârnic. Gârnic is a village inhabited by *pemi*, a Czech origin population from Caraș-Severin County. A prominent figure within her community, Maria paused her usual Saturday household chores to speak with us.

<sup>7</sup> Original statement: "Stai și ce uită, cu mama..."

<sup>8</sup> Original statement: "Și să vă mai spun ceva, doamnă: nu faci niciodată pe economie și nu arunci niciodată nimic."

<sup>9</sup> For a case study on how different desserts, understood as cultural facts, outline the existence of a local or regional identity, see also Mihuş (2023).



Being a talented cook, she graciously prepared some local pies for us, showcasing the distinctive gastronomy of the region. At the same time, she is recognized as an expert on local cuisine, esteemed by both her local community and by the neighbouring villages. It was the mayor himself who recommended Maria Merhaud as the best informant on the topic we were interested in.



[Photo 2 Maria Merhaud and Otilia Hedeșan, photo taken immediately after the interview, in the front yard of Maria Merhaud]

Thanks to her widespread recognition, our informant frequently participates in cooking shows where she can demonstrate her culinary expertise in practice and share her knowledge of local cuisine. Once she understood our specific area of interest, she promptly adjusted her focus to align with our expectations.

Thus, Maria Merhaud began to offer relevant examples related to the way she cooks for her own family and for the tourists she receives inside her agrotourism guesthouse, making permanent comparisons with old culinary techniques and practices. In fact, one of the first information that Maria Merhaud shares with us states the existence of rather a new approach in her cuisine: ‘my daughter in law is from Czech Republic and she eats in a very healthy manner.’<sup>10</sup> Her reply is the key of a major topic emerging at the end of our discussion and which related to healthy food as a subject of reflection encouraged by the new generations, emerging from the urban space and slowly penetrating the rural communities. This space is represented here by the place of origin of the daughter-in-law of our informant. Healthy lifestyle and organic farming are common practices in the family of Maria Merhaud, as she likes to underline every time she has the opportunity.

With a particular sense of humour, Maria managed to review and to differentiate certain ingredients as defining for the multiethnic Banat, underlying minor yet defining differences between ethnic groups that live in the region. Expert in the culinary traditions of the area where she lives, our informant’s focus is not exclusive to an ethnic group, but she rather identifies local specificities. Thus, the terms with which Maria Merhaud operates are not ethnic, but belong to a territorial neighbouring. She does not refer to *Pemi* and / or / versus *Romanians*, but to *those living in Gârnic* and / or / versus *those living in*, for instance, Padina Matei, the neighbouring village. These differences create almost aversion and are represented by the supposed consumption of snails by the inhabitants of the neighbouring village. A particular topic addressed by our informant is related to the influence that starch has on health, given that Pemi communities are known for consuming large quantities of potatoes that are found as a basic ingredient in many of the dishes specific to these communities. Thus, after having just provided us with five recipes of dishes that she herself considers specifically local and which are based on a mixture of potatoes and flour

<sup>10</sup> Original statement: “nora mea e din Cehia, ea mănâncă foarte sănătos”.

(especially wheat flour), Maria Merhaud blames her husband's illness on the consumption of bread from bakery and which is suspected to be obtained from flour flour with a higher starch content.

A month later, on March 27, we conducted a remote interview which took the form of a videoconference. Our intention was to have a food focused discussion with one of our older informants, Mărioara Sârbu. *Uina* Mărioara Sârbu, as known in her home village, was several years ago the main informant which has provided huge quantity of information on numerous topics related to the traditional life of her old village (see Hedeşan, 2015). Since the mediator of this remote discussion, who was a student at our university at the time, needed to locate a space with a reliable internet connection, Mărioara Sârbu had to go from her home to the location where our mediator had set up the required electronic devices. In particular, she had to go at Ana Boier's house, one of her friends and, at the same time one of the persons we knew from previous research. Moreover, Ana Boier is the grandmother of the student who has mediated the meeting. Consequently, both Mărioara and Ana attended the discussion and answered our questions.



[Photo 3 Ana Boier and Mărioara Sârbu, printscreen taken during the on-line interview]

The interview was, therefore, marked by the unfamiliarity stemming from the senior interlocutors' first-time use of video conferencing, contrasting with their accustomed older routines, to the extent that we had seen and interacted with both women numerous times in previous years. The fact that we had often approached the food topic during our previous discussions posed a limitation on the current interaction. Both women often provided answers that referenced stories or events already recounted in detail, assuming familiarity from all attendees of the meeting.

However, after they adapted to the videoconferencing way of communicating, the two elderly women coherently presented several categories of information: the rhythms of daily meals, including times when family members were engaged in agricultural work and away from the home; an important part of the day working their lots situated outside the village; the differences between festive meals, including Sunday meals and the usual ones, specific to weekdays; the succession of dishes prepared in a week; the types of meat used, including fish and venison; the types of vegetables and fruits they use. Nevertheless, they described the culinary side of several important festive moments, with an emphasis on wedding parties. The discussion was rich in ethnographic details, including some memories of the two women which allowed the identification of the moments from the last half of century when certain food related realities suffered transformations and were modernized. The discussion thus provided an opportunity to reminisce about the moments when the use of sophisticated crockery and cutlery was introduced, the drinking of coffee, as well as the preparation of cakes and, above all, their decoration, prepared especially for festive moments and with social relevance. Although in several cases, requests were made for recipes for certain dishes,

they were quickly summarized without details about the quantities or actions needed. This was a consequence of the belief that a face-to-face meeting would be established in the near future to discuss these subjects in detail.

Our fourth interview conducted with Mariana Cotolan and her husband, marking our third face-to-face field research interaction. The discussion took place in a village very close to Timișoara, Belinț, known as the subject of a complex sociological research during the interwar period, research that led to the publication of a series of studies on different areas of social life (see Belint, 1938).



[Photo 4 Mariana Cotolan, photo taken during the interview]

To organize the discussion with Mariana Cotolan, we contacted one of the local Romanian language teachers, asking him to recommend a person with whom we may discuss about local food, about food traditions and who could possibly provide some recipes of traditional dishes. Almost without hesitation, he replied that it will be impossible to find anyone in Belinț who could answer these questions, as “there are no traditions [i.e.: gastronomic traditions] in Belinț.” Less than half an hour later, his wife, also a teacher, called back to suggest a few people to talk to. It is worth mentioning here the existence of persons which are somehow unable to understand that certain well-known practices, generally applied in their own community, may constitute a heritage that deserves investigation. This event raises the question on the representation of tradition. What exactly do the general public or local intellectuals tend to regard as tradition? How broad should the umbrella be that encompasses the concept of “tradition”? More precisely, the question would be: What items can be classified as food heritage according to these expectations?

Returning to our informant, Mariana Cotolan tends to her garden and produces a variety of preserves, particularly pickles, for the food markets. The discussions we had with her and with her husband was a consistent one and revolved around two main topics: everyday dishes, including name(s) or recipe(s), and canned food for customers in town. The expression that characterizes her is related to the moment when, following the death of her mother, she was somewhat compelled to learn how to cook and care for her entire family. It was that moment that shaped the course of her entire life: ‘from that moment on it was decided that I would be a housewife [...] Well, necessity is the best teacher ever.’<sup>11</sup>

Kind and talkative, Mariana Cotolan managed to successfully present a large part of the culinary specificities of the village and, implicitly, of the Banat region. On her own initiative or in response to our questions, she presented almost thirty dishes, in many cases offering exact recipes, with quantities, proportions that must be respected, processing procedures and sequences that cannot be violated in order to obtain a good quality and tasteful dish. The discussion with her revealed above all a lengthy series of everyday dishes,

<sup>11</sup> Original statement: “Și de atunci a rămas că eu am rămas gospodină [...] E, nevoia te învață.”



which she presented briefly and often elliptically, counting on sharing some implicit aspects with us.

Along with these, however, it is worth emphasizing the existence of two other categories of products. First, we should mention those products that Mariana prepares together with her husband in order to preserve and to sell throughout the year, such as pickles, *zacusca*<sup>12</sup> or various jams or other fruit preserves. Secondly, she provided an extremely short but very interesting list of forgotten or near-forgotten dishes. The discussion held in Belinț also allowed the review of a long line of customs related to gastronomy as a component of everyday life. In this regard, Mariana Cotolan presents in detail all the dishes which need to be prepared for a typical Sunday meal and explains the ritual to be followed on this occasion, including the influence that Sunday mass has on establishing the exact time to eat the meal. The fact that Mariana Cotolan's family products are meant to be sold on the market of one of Romania's largest cities is also extremely important. It suggests the existence of some real supply networks that are constantly being reconfigured. Their object is represented by the existence of certain products that are considered to be "homemade", but which, however, cannot be produced in the city's kitchens.

The last case we are presenting here is the interview done with Mărioara Fanu. She was a Romanian Language and Literature teacher, currently living in Sârbova, Timiș County. We got to know Mărioara following the recommendation of one of our university's professors, who happens to be a distant relative. Of all the informants we interacted with about food, Mărioara was somehow the shyest, repeating almost obsessively during the interview that she cannot give us too much information on this topic because she lacked knowledge about it. From Mărioara Fanu's initial attitude, it might have been inferred that she belonged to a very limited category of women who, for various reasons, had not spent much time in the kitchen. However, as she herself states, she was the woman who cooked, baked and took care of her family. Let's not forget that being a teacher of the Romanian Language her representation on what tradition means could have been altered / shaped due to common belief that only exceptional cultural facts deserve to be mentioned in and/or recorded by an ethnographic investigation. Moreover, she was the only informant that expressed a flat denial regarding any kind of video proof of our interaction. Consequently, she is the only interlocutor with whom our team has no photo. Despite this special context of our interaction, it is important to underline that the interview with Mărioara Fanu is not devoid of content. The expression that characterizes her would be: 'I don't know / we don't have such [...] Although, [...]'<sup>13</sup> which she repeated especially in the first part of the discussion. At a certain time, her daughter and husband joined us, and this relieved a bit our informant. As a result, she was able to be more relaxed when providing answers and examples.

Despite her persistent belief that she might not be well-versed in the existence of a culinary local specificity, the discussion with Mărioara Fanu depicted the predominant types of meals people consumed several decades ago, in comparison with the frequency of meals and variety of prepared dishes in contemporary times. In fact, her testimony led to the identification of two rhythms according to which dishes or certain foods are consumed in Banat villages from the plane area. It is, on the one hand, a type and frequency of meals according to a daily criterion and, on the other hand, the compliance to a certain menu considering the weekly rhythm of feeding in the traditional world. For instance, according to these norms, chicken soup is to be eaten on Sunday and beans soup is preferred on Friday.

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<sup>12</sup> Product obtained from vegetables, especially eggplant, beans, mushrooms, carrots, pepper, tomatoes and onion mixed and preserved in jars.

<sup>13</sup> Original statement: "Nu știu / n-avem [...] dar [...]".

Mărioara Fanu managed to list several hearty soup recipes, described in a very personal manner. Thus, regardless of the ingredient that seems to give the specificity of each soup (cabbage, peas, potatoes) and even its name, she insists on the presence of pork meat or sausages as core ingredient.

At the time we are writing this article we have the experience of almost two hundred interviews done in very different regions and research contexts. Considering this, the showcases we took into consideration no longer seem to us as being the most useful in terms of ethnographic resource. Although, these interviews have enabled us to determine several research and methodological topics to be taken into consideration.

The context in which these five interviews were conducted gives them a special value. The negotiation to set up the meeting, the arguments of each of the parties, the conditions in which the discussions were organized are all angles that deserve to be discussed as source of what we might call *ethnological motivation*. What can determine the people, members of a specific culture, to share their knowledge and their life experience about a certain topic, when the very act of speaking<sup>14</sup> might be a dangerous one?

### 3. Conclusions: (re)thinking the fieldwork

At the end of the experience, we had with the above-mentioned informants, we (re)gained the field after a year of both imposed and self-imposed lockdown and a few months of probing. The interaction with these nearby informants facilitated the reintegration into the field research routine that we were used to. Moreover, it has drawn some useful conclusions in what concerns research methodology to be used in our further research focusing on food heritage. Precarious, fragmentary, often conducted with the promise of a follow-up meeting which could provide the framework of entering the details which were supposed to introduce us to secrets of local gastronomy or witness culinary demonstrations, the five interviews summarized above provided a first set of documents meant to make us rethink field research in times of crisis.

First, despite the uncertain pandemic situation and the necessity of a longer preparatory discussions intended to establish the terms of the meetings, all the recommended people agreed to discuss with us about food. This is even more relevant as, in each of the cases, we have emphasized that we were conducting research related to local traditions, to specific family food, without producing television shows and without overexposing our interlocutors. It seems central to us, under these conditions, to identify the existence of a *need to tell*, a real duty *to tell relevant information about one's own culture*, a vector that characterizes communities just as, for the researcher, there is a work ethic that implies *his obligation to make all necessary efforts to find out information*.

Secondly, however few, these first interviews reveal certain proportions: two interviews were conducted in plain villages from Banat, two in the Mountain area of the same region and one on the Serbian side of the above mentioned cross-border region. Additionally, four of them were conducted in the traditional manner, face-to-face, while one was conducted online, proportion which is not far from the general distribution of interactions carried out

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<sup>14</sup> For multiple functions of oral narrations in terms of both safeguarding content and survival, see Todorov, 1978, p. 41. “Le procès d'énonciation de la parole reçoit dans le conte arabe une interprétation qui ne laisse plus de doute quant à son importance. Si tous les personnages ne cessent pas de raconter des histoires, c'est que cet acte a reçu une consécration suprême: raconteur égale vivre. L'exemple le plus évident est celui de Chahrazade elle-même qui vit uniquement dans la mesure où elle peut continuer à raconter; mais cette situation est répétée sans cesse à l'intérieur du conte.” “The process of speaking receives an interpretation in the Arab tale which leaves no doubt as to its importance. If all the characters do not stop telling their stories, it is because the act of speaking has received a supreme consecration: speaking means living. The most obvious example is that of Scheherazade herself who lives only to the extent that she can continue to tell the story; but this situation is constantly repeated within the tale’ (our translation).

throughout the project.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the informants were women, but the discussion with Mariana Cotolan was held in the presence of her husband, who brought a series of additional relevant details and, above all, provided necessary explanation regarding selling their products. Although none of the interlocutors are officially professionals in the field of gastronomy, two of our informants have a semi-professional status, their activity being oriented towards the production of specific local foods and dishes, non-existent in commercial chains or, at least, non-existent in a form that might make them acceptable and / or good, according to local traditional standards. Otherwise, people who are willing to talk about food know the general domestic practices related to dish preparation, being familiar with the recipes and quantities required for home cooking.

Food topic, and, more precisely, the traditional food topic as publicly presented by televisions, YouTube channels or through various vlogs has created in recent decades interest in a relatively narrow range of products, whether festive or even semi-rituals, either with special, little-known names, or made with the use of strange, rare or atypical ingredients. Under these circumstances, food tradition is understood as a kind of exoticism that is difficult to be explain and perceived as a reality outside the routine of everyday existence. Considering this, the reluctance of some of our interlocutors or especially of those who recommended them is an attitude worth to be mentioned. The portrayal of tradition as exuberant, specific, and exotic leads many people to perceive themselves as outsiders to it. Returning to the story of one's own experience, lives and cultures, discovering the meanings that food has in these frameworks is a long-term effort to educate traditional Romanian communities. In fact, this is an effort to rehabilitate the understanding and representation of traditions.

Having overcome the initiation crisis in researching daily food, we were presented with a profile of the informant we intended to pursue for further field research. Thus, a good informant for this topic is rather a middle-aged woman who cooks regularly for her family. Such an informant is preferable due to cultural, social and pragmatic reasons. In nowadays Romania, preparing the daily food is a practice related to women's abilities. This means that, in general, in a family, the woman is the person in charge of daily cooking. Let's not forget that the main subject of our research was everyday food and not the ritual or festive contexts which might suppose exceptional dishes or cooking techniques. Choosing a middle-aged informant is a pragmatic criterion. On the one hand, these people are aged enough to know the principles of an old-style local cuisine. On the other hand, they are young and mobile enough to cook in a manner that integrates new ingredients or dishes without violating the tradition's rules. An informant specialized in cooking certain dishes or in certain contexts is also extremely useful for this type of investigation, especially in clarifying specific issues related to food preparation and / or consumption. At the same time, this informant is not intimidated by the national antonymic approach to traditional food promoted especially by the media. We are considering here, on the one hand, the promotion of certain dishes perceived as representative and plentiful, and, on the other, the promotion of humble dishes, a symbol of poverty and an unfavourable historical past. A post-pandemic patient field research

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<sup>15</sup> In a study written in 2023, two years after the interval we are analyzing here, the situation was described as follows: "To summarize: the majority of our field investigation took place face-to-face, according to the standards of canonical ethnography (71.15% of the studies); the online interviews covered around a quarter of the studies (25.97%); the places which were the subject of a hybrid approach (face-to-face and remotely) represent only a tiny part of the research (2.88%)." "Pour résumer : la plus grande partie de notre enquête de terrain s'est déroulée en face à face, selon les normes de l'ethnographie canonique (71,15% des points étudiés) ; les entretiens en ligne ont couvert environ un quart des points étudiés (25,97 %) ; les lieux qui ont fait l'objet d'une démarche hybride (en présentiel et à distance) ne représentent qu'une infime partie de la recherche (2,88%)" (Hedeşan & Timoçe, 2023, p. 112).

has revealed to us a greyer side of reality, a responsible, gradual, and difficult return to the field research.

In terms of content, following these five interviews, the existence of several daily dishes was undoubtedly settled. Potato soup with meat, cabbage soup with meat, bean soup with meat, many dishes based on dough or various forms of pasta, thickening based on flour and paprika are the most common daily dishes or traditional cooking methods specific to Banat region. Clear noodle soup, pork, poultry are several dishes reserved for Sundays or feasts and holidays. Also, for these special days, certain cakes or pies are prepared so that the dessert which is frequently chosen on these.

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