

“I DID IT ALL WITH THESE HANDS AND THIS BACK”: THE LIFE HISTORY AS A RESEARCH METHOD IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the life history as a research method in the humanities and social sciences. It focuses on numerous insights into social change that life histories can provide while also exploring prominent challenges that can arise when applying this method. An example of a life history of a pensioner from Moldavia, Romania is presented in order to illustrate their potential. It describes labor she performed in agriculture, success she experienced raising a family and building a house, access she gained to various entitlements under socialism and sentiments she had about her life.

Keywords: Life History; Research Methods; Pensioners; Moldavia, Romania; Socialism and Post-Socialism.

1. Introduction

“I had created a home by the age of 35,” Sorina² said with pride; “the house was built and we had three children.” This declaration occurred during an interview I held in Galați in 2004 with Sorina, a pensioner in her sixties who had lived more than half her life in rural Moldavia. She had ample reason for feeling triumphant, having successfully juggled myriad responsibilities over many years – raising children largely on her own while her husband worked long hours in Galați; performing various duties on the collective farm that had been organized in her village; maintaining the household; and many other activities.

The conversation in which these recollections were recounted was one of many I held with Sorina. Together they constituted a “life history” I was compiling of her as part of a much larger research project I was conducting as a doctoral student in cultural anthropology. I had come to Romania, specifically Galați, to learn about the impact upon older men and women of changes to their society, chiefly within the healthcare system, following the end of socialist rule in 1989. This was a

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² In order to protect the identity of this person and that of her husband, I have used pseudonyms and have slightly altered some details of their lives.

problem that had caught my attention while teaching English in the country in the 1990s. I did not limit myself to learning about the post-revolutionary situation of retirees, however; in order to fully appreciate how older people experienced and evaluated the post-socialist era, it was also essential to investigate what they had gone through earlier in their lives. The life history was a useful tool for accomplishing this.

This paper briefly examines the life history. My primary purpose is to showcase the value of this method to research not only in anthropology and related social sciences but also to disciplines within the humanities. Notwithstanding pitfalls one can encounter when gathering life histories, some prime examples of which I spotlight, this research instrument has considerable potential because it can enhance our knowledge of varying facets of life in a particular time and place and because it serves as a portal onto how people manage and assess social change over the course of their lives. Sorina's life history, a portion of which I summarize, is evidence of this.

2. The Life History and Social Change

There is considerable variation in the definitions scholars give to the life history (e.g., Garro and Mattingly 2000:9, Kratz 2001:132-134). One basis on which they can be categorized is the extent to which they characterize the life history as a research device that is effective not only for teaching us about the novel experiences through which an individual has passed but also about the larger historical context in which his or her life has been embedded. Linde (1993:21), for example, views the life history as an instrument that can best assist the researcher in excavating the unique aspects of people's lives. We see the outcome of this in her explanation of how she became a linguist. She concentrates on the people in her life who gave her encouragement, such as family and teachers (op. cit.:5). We notice in this history a lack of attention to profound social change, such as women's greater access to higher education beginning in the 1960s, that undoubtedly influenced her professional life and those of other women of certain social class, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Others, in contrast, utilize the life history to shine light upon the structural conditions of a period of time. Mintz's life history of "Don Taso," a Puerto Rican man born in the early 20th century who labored in the sugarcane industry (1974), is paradigmatic of this. Although in it we learn idiosyncrasies of the man's life, its far more important contribution is what it tells us about the momentous changes unfolding in Puerto Rican society after it became a U.S. possession. These included the transformation of the economy due to control over many productive sectors falling into the hands of an exclusive set of prosperous U.S. corporations and the mass migration of rural inhabitants to metropolises such as New York City for work in burgeoning industrial sectors (cf. Sánchez Korrol 1983). Without question,

these processes are critical to our understanding of Puerto Rico in this era because they affected an entire generation of people of a specific social class background, not merely a single individual.

Many examples of scholarship on the socialist period in Romania to varying extents as well draw upon life histories in producing knowledge of changes that took place during those decades. A recent example of this is Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery's 2011 history of the collectivization of agricultural land from 1949 to 1962. Using oral histories and other sources, they teach us about the highly contested nature of this mandate. We learn that even people who were given the responsibility for ensuring this directive was fulfilled were often conflicted about it. In another example, we gain insight into the role that the secret police played during Romania's socialist history from Dennis Deletant's (1995, 1999) writing, which is heavily based upon records of the *Securitate* and discussions he had with people who lived through the period. The harsh treatment of political prisoners in Sighet and other locations in the 1940s and 1950s (1999:195-224) is revealed through this, as are the daring efforts on the part of some to fight against the often brutal tactics of the regime (op. cit.:225-234). David Kideckel (1993) similarly draws upon life histories he accumulated from people over the years he conducted research in socialist Romania to make a point about the construction of the self under socialism. He mines them to argue that socialism ironically cultivated an increasing sense of an isolated self rather than a communal one.

I relied upon the life history to learn more about changes to society that had fundamentally affected the lives of pensioners I was getting to know in Galați and to ascertain their perceptions of life under socialism and post-socialism. Anthropological research conducted in socialist Romania (Cole 1981, Kideckel op.cit., Verdery 1983) had already taught me about the partial transformation of peasants to workers as a result of industrialization, but I was eager to afford Moldavian retirees the opportunity to talk about what this shift had meant to them as well as to calculate the impact of other structural changes to Romanian society. What did it mean, for example, that under socialism there had been increased access to healthcare services, housing, education, and social welfare benefits such as pensions and how did peasants experience the variety and amount of work socialism imposed upon them? Asking people to recount the history of their lives by responding to open-ended questions about the past was a constructive strategy for getting at precisely these changes.

My overall point is that one can potentially discern patterns within an individual life history that are common as well to the histories of other people of similar social and economic background who have lived through the same historical processes within a particular context. Life histories can reveal relevant details about people's past material circumstances and their cultural beliefs and practices. With them we can gain knowledge about people's opinions of themselves and their societies, including how they believe both have changed over the course of time.

And they can be windows onto initiatives, such as social movements, that people undertake in order to bring about change (Kratz op. cit.:132, Mintz op. cit.:253, Ochs and Capps 1996:26). In other words, life histories are testimonials from which we can discover many facets of life during a particular era.

3. Interpretive Challenges

Despite their potential, there are many reasons for interpreting life histories with caution. One is that they are always fragmentary (Linde op. cit.:27, Mintz op. cit.:253, Ochs and Capps op. cit.:21). A chief cause of this may be that for different reasons people forget about, or are unaware of, various details about their lives. In some cases, most notably when one is engaged in research on a politically or socially sensitive topic, participants may remain silent about certain matters because they are emotionally distressing (Ochs and Capps op. cit.:32-33) or because they do not entirely trust the intentions of the researcher. As well, study participants may suffer serious health problems that make it difficult or impossible for them to continue sharing their histories or they may simply prefer to talk about what they are going through in their day-to-day lives than to explore deeper memories.

Being vigilant of these possible obstacles to recording a complete life history – an aim that in itself is questionable – is crucial; nevertheless, this method can be very fruitful, especially if the researcher and the participant have to some degree built a personal relationship with one another. This is illustrated not only in the history Mintz wrote but also in other life histories (e.g., Behar 1993, Crapanzano 1980); in all of these cases the two knew one another very well. This was largely true regarding the relationships I had with the men and women in Galați who agreed to tell me their life histories – I had spent considerable time with each of them in different social settings, which had allowed us to get to know one another to a considerable extent.

The challenges involved in composing life histories continue even when the researcher knows the informant well, however. Some scholars point out that descriptions of past events may be inaccurate because they stem from people's "imposing order" on events that in actuality had been nuanced or chaotic (Garro and Mattingly op. cit.:267). The rationale for such reconfiguring may be complex. Some may do it in order to cast themselves in a favorable light – perhaps telling their life history gives them the rare opportunity to portray themselves as morally upright, a characterization that may be somewhat false. Other people may carry out such cleansing of the past without even being fully conscious of it. In this way, their narratives may possibly make a point about their contemporary lives instead of their pasts (Capps and Ochs op. cit.:25). This may occur when people offer uncritical or nostalgic interpretations of previous happenings; these may be

momentary mental escapes from difficult times in the here and now rather than truthful renditions of history.

Pragmatic circumstances may lead people to misrepresent their histories too. The physical setting in which someone conveys his or her life history, the company of other people during the process and the time devoted to the endeavor can all have a bearing on the outcome. Moreover, in some cultural contexts the construction of life histories may be influenced by radically different conceptions between researchers and participants of what precisely a life history even is (Linde op. cit.:11). Behar (op. cit.), for example, observed that her interlocutor likened the process of sharing her past to confessing to a religious authority. Such cultural differences can guide people to share specific aspects of their lives in a particular manner. Added to this, the content of life histories, and the form they take, can be shaped by a multitude of incentives for which people agree to disclose their pasts with researchers. Belief that they have lived a life worth recounting; eagerness to talk about memories that are meaningful to them; desire for social contact; interest in supporting the undertaking of a student or scholar from a country viewed favorably; anticipated material benefit; and many other factors may induce people to offer their histories or to mold them in one way or another. If this were not enough, life histories may be tacitly distorted by researchers themselves through omission of data they deem irrelevant or through the rearrangement of information they have accumulated (Kratz op. cit.:128, Garro and Mattingly op. cit.:24, Ochs and Capps op. cit.:24).

These interpretive challenges are significant, yet in my view they need not tie one's hands. Being sensitive to the possible existence and consequences of them can be an antidote to their completely tarnishing the veracity of a life history. In the histories I gathered I attempted to maintain awareness of probable sources of bias, and I carefully weighed the intentions driving people to agree to sit with me and tell me about their pasts. In the end I felt comfortable that I had accumulated life histories that gave valuable and largely overlooked glimpses into life in Romania during the socialist period. In the next section, I present vignettes from the life history I gathered from Sorina and describe both our relationship and what I thought motivated her to divulge her past to me.

4. Sorina's Life History

I became acquainted with Sorina at a recreational center for retirees in Galați early in 2004. When she learned I was interested in gathering life histories from pensioners she expressed a strong desire to participate, enthusiastically saying she had a great deal to share about her life. Because of this, 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 without difficulty despite minor interruptions. I was nevertheless concerned about the influence the

formal setting and our still incipient relationship may have had on our interaction. In the ensuing months I continued to get to know her during visits to the center, our connection developing even further when she announced one day to people in attendance that she was looking to sublet a room in her apartment. I showed interest, and we arranged for me to see the place. Because at the time I was locked into a lease, I could not move in right away, but we planned that I would stay with her and her husband if I were to return in the future for further research. This came to pass on a couple of occasions, during most of which I indeed stayed with them.

The life history I gathered of Sorina was based on a wide variety of interactions with her. In addition to the center interview, we held formal conversations at her home in the kitchen or the room in which she watched television, alone or with her husband nearby. I also learned much about her past through informal, spontaneous exchanges that took place rather naturally by my living with her.

Reflecting on our countless conversations, I believe Sorina had two main reasons for sharing details about her past with me. Primarily, she genuinely felt her life was worth chronicling given both her accomplishments and her struggles. She regularly declared her appreciation for the opportunity to have her life documented since in her opinion she had been through – and had done – so much. She was immensely proud of the family she had built and of other successes she had had. At the same time, I wondered whether her life stories were at times also a metacommentary on conditions since the 1989 revolution, her occasional reminders of the pain she had suffered in the past stimulated by very real concerns she had in the present day. These included the minimal social insurance income she received from the state that she and her husband coupled with his minuscule pension from work in industry to attempt to make ends meet. This was very daunting given the cost of food, utilities, medical expenditures and other necessities. Although they had children, none could effortlessly help them out because of the pressures with which they lived in their own immediate households. And all of this was after a lifetime of strenuous work and responsibility. Notwithstanding the potential influence of contemporary concerns on her renderings of the past, in the end I felt I received a quite accurate understanding of at least some of what she had gone through in life largely because of all the time we spent together over repeat visits I made to the city. In later years she would even occasionally return to some of her history, repeating with exactitude the incidents she had described in earlier years.

I have pieced together our exchanges in the following history. Thus, the presentation does not follow the chronology in which the history was told. This flowed from my occasional interest in returning to periods of her life shortchanged in earlier conversations for any number of reasons and from the unanticipated insights she shared from time to time about her past.

Sorina was born in the 1930s to a couple who lived in a small town along the Prut River. Her family, among the town's small landholders, owned approximately four

hectares of property. Following the pattern common among rural inhabitants in that historical period, they derived the majority of their household income from working their own and others' land. She was one of nine children, nearly half of whom died in their first year of life, most likely succumbing to an infectious illness, a common cause of mortality among children in that period.

Among Sorina's earliest memories were her experiences during the Second World War. She described the arrival of hostilities to her village in 1944 when the Axis powers were being overtaken by the Allies. This brought Russian soldiers into her town, Sorina recalling that they forced civilians from their homes, making her a "refugee." Absent her mother, who at first refused to leave the home, her family fled the village. They settled in a field and created a shelter where her mother later joined them, remaining there for one to two months and taking cover whenever warplanes flew overhead.

While the war continued to be waged, Sorina's childhood was again disrupted 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 observing that Sorina was diligent, thinking she could assist his son and son's wife, who were busy medical professionals. Sorina, unaware of the purpose for being sent there, anticipated going school. Instead, she performed chores, such as buying bread and milk, staples which were chronically in short supply and consequently required standing in long lines to purchase. She claimed she endured physical abuse from the couple and lived through the Allied bombing raids on the capital in August 1944. Feeling frightened and trapped in the situation, at one point she sought comfort from nuns at a church and ultimately freed herself from the approximately nine month ordeal by tearfully complaining to the son's mother during a visit she made. She then returned to her village.

Soon thereafter Sorina began to attend school near her home, but this was unexpectedly interrupted by the famine that befell Moldavia in 1946 and 1947 as a result of drought in the region and the subsequent diversion of crops to the Soviet Union as war reparations (Hitchins 1994:535-536). Sorina described her food consumption in that 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. In order to assist families during this crisis, the government initiated a program to send children from stricken areas to live with families in other parts of the country. She was placed on a train that took her to a town in Oltenia, where she moved in with a peasant family for about one year. During her stay with them, her school attendance was again suspended, Sorina instead working in the fields. She expressed little regret for this, however, saying that the family treated her very well.

After returning home the following year, Sorina began to go to school. With dignity, she recalled being a good student, saying she finished four years of

classroom study, yet regrettably she could not continue. The door to further education was closed as her labor was needed in agrarian activities and her family was incapable of paying a fee for education that she said was still compulsory.

Sorina described her chief responsibilities on the land. A major one was cultivating crops. She hoed fields planted with corn and gathered the ears at harvest time, storing them in a barn and taking them to a mill where they were ground into corn meal for making *mămăligă*. With a sickle she cut down the corn stalks, which were fed to their stock of animals. Particularly backbreaking was harvesting wheat because it required one to bend over for long periods of time, but it was an important grain that could be put to multiple uses.

Sorina performed this work at her parents' home until her late teens. At that age she was married even though she said she did not want to be. Her prospective in-laws, who were also peasants living in another village along the Prut River, learned from a neighbor that she was a hard worker and in time one of Sorina's cousins took her to their home. She was placed in a room alone with her future husband Flaviu, his family waiting in an adjacent hall while they spoke. Flaviu then asked for her hand in marriage; given the social pressure, she felt she could not refuse him despite feeling very uncertain and confused. She said she doubted whether he was the husband she wanted, telling me Flaviu was too soft-spoken for her taste and that she anyway had already developed feelings for another man away in the military.

Despite Sorina's reluctance, the two were married, and she was brought to live in her in-laws' home. She was obliged to perform an array of exacting duties, feeding animals, working the fields, making meals and much more. It was an especially grueling period for her because she had little control over her situation and knew there was no way out. Returning home was out of the question because of the "shame" it would bring upon her family. Instead she silently stuck with it, but it drained her physically and emotionally.

In order to move out of her in-laws' residence, Sorina and her husband had to build a house. She was largely responsible for this because Flaviu was occupied with military service and work that took him out of the village on a regular basis. Building the house took many years, and, although it was an arduous undertaking, Sorina accepted it:

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... [I mixed] clay with straw and water. The clay and water turned into 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 this back.

In the meantime (1960s), she and her husband began to have their own family.

A typical day in their household began at five in the morning with her husband's departure for work. A combination of childcare, agricultural labor,³ housekeeping and home construction was often on Sorina's agenda:

I would come home [from the fields in the early morning] and look through the window to see if the kids had gotten up. If they weren't up, I would again return to the fields and finish what I needed to do 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 that, I'd go inside to clean up after them, and after that 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 my legs. From this I would make wattle.

At times, she showed great pride in her achievements as manifest in the words with which this paper began. Such pleasant memories were by no means out of the ordinary for Sorina, but more often it was the hardship of those years that came to her:

There was just so much work. I was hungry, tired, and down-and-out. 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... I began to receive treatment in order to keep things together because I was unsettled 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... [but] since I couldn't take it anymore and was just complaining to myself, the doctor gave me pills.

She suffered not only psychologically but also physically, over time developing several medical problems, including severe pain in her lower back and thigh due to a ruptured disc in her spinal column. She attributed this to years of carrying heavy loads. The back pain grew worse when she slipped and fell on ice one winter while going to a relative's house, which left her unable to walk for approximately six months because a disc in her back had been displaced. Sorina eventually received care in Bucharest but her recovery took many months and was never complete. Pain returned from time to time even though she sought out rehabilitation as recommended by the doctor.

³ Sorina said little about the campaign to collectivize land under socialism perhaps because the subject made her too uncomfortable, a reaction Kligman and Verdery (op. cit.) observed among some people in their research on the topic. She did say that her father had been against the program and had been assaulted because of his opposition.

Sorina's life in the countryside came to an end in the 1980s, when she was in her forties. A spacious, apartment became available to her family in a neighborhood in Galați that until the 1970s had been open grassland and fields. This transition terminated Sorina's involvement in agricultural labor. She wanted to obtain a job in the city in order to secure a retirement income, but she explained that Flaviu was opposed to the idea. As a result of this, Sorina stayed at home caring for the household and received social insurance for her health problems. When I asked whether she ever missed living in the countryside, she said absolutely not – life there, she emphasized, had required too much of her.

5. Analyzing the Life History

Sorina's life history, albeit abbreviated here, provides rare insight into many trends characteristic of Romania's recent history. Her taxing work life tells us about the transformation of the country's economy and its social class structure under socialism. From one that was based very heavily on agrarian production prior to the Second World War, it was reinvented after the rise to power of the Romanian Communist Party through the collectivization of agriculture and the expansion of industry. Women and men worked in different manners in this new landscape, but overall a change in class position to peasant-worker was sweeping over a people who up to that point had almost exclusively only worked the land. Sorina's work life represented a pattern that was very common to rural-based women. In large numbers they labored on collective farms to fulfill production quotas, cared for children and maintained households.⁴ Flaviu's work history was common to men in rural areas. They commuted to urban hubs, such as Galați, that were rapidly industrializing in order to fill vacancies in manufacturing (Moskoff 1978).

The knowledge I accumulated about the work histories of pensioners from Sorina and others was important to my understanding of the period since the revolution as well. It confirmed my belief that a social injustice was being committed against older people since they had given so much to the development of the economy during the socialist period only to find themselves living in marginal conditions in retirement. "After all the work I've done, this is what I get" protested one woman who had worked in food processing, raised a set of children all but singlehandedly and seasonally conducted agriculture yet felt compelled as a retiree to take up informal employment because her pension did not cover her expenses. These were women and men who had made a significant contribution to the betterment of their societies through hard work and sacrifice but were left to their own devices on meager pensions during a phase of life when social and economic support was instead what they merited.

⁴ I do not know, however, how common it was for women to construct homes.

Sorina's past also tells us about access to public healthcare services under socialism. She went to a "health post" in her village when she was "unsettled" about the quality of her life, receiving medication to help alleviate the problem, and she headed to Bucharest when she needed major surgery and rehabilitation. Her experiences demonstrated a fundamental shift in the lives of rural dwellers. Prior to the socialist era, few could afford healthcare services as they were not government subsidized and most people were ineligible for accident and illness insurance. In the mid-1930s, less than five percent of the population had access to insurance, and those who did were mostly urban residents (Kaser 1976:236). It is partly for this reason that life expectancy in Romania remained on average eight years lower than those in other European countries between the First and Second World Wars (Şandru 1980:203).

The creation of a national healthcare system soon after the Second World War changed this dramatically. One of the system's first goals was halting the spread of infectious diseases, which continued to plague both rural and urban populations. It met this challenge with considerable success, reducing the incidence of diphtheria, poliomyelitis, typhoid fever, tetanus and several other contagious illnesses markedly such that by the 1960s they were all but eliminated from the population. As well by the 1960s, many services were offered free-of-charge, at least officially, to most people in rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, the proportion of trained physicians, nurses and other medical professionals to the population grew significantly. While during the interwar period there was one physician to every 17,000 inhabitants in rural areas (Gheorghiu 1937, cited in Scurtu 2003:169), by 1974 the ratio was one to 630. This was made possible by an expansion of medical schools in major cities such as Bucharest, Iaşi, Cluj and Timișoara. In 1960 there were nearly 25,000 physicians in the country, and by the early 1970s the amount had gone above 31,000. Their knowledge was among the most comprehensive within the Soviet bloc partly because of widespread familiarity with French, which made it relatively easy for healthcare professionals in Romania to keep abreast of advances in medicine beyond the Soviet sphere (Kaser 1976:241, 244, 246-248, 262).

Notwithstanding these remarkable achievements, problems existed within the public healthcare system under socialism. Inequality in access to services persisted between rural and urban areas and on the basis of social class. The frequency of visits rural residents made to physicians remained low relative to that of 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).

Although it is important to bear in mind such failings of the healthcare system during the socialist period, not to mention a breakdown in service provision in the 1980s when severe austerity measures were enacted, significant improvement to

the status of the population's health did occur in that era. We see this not only in the aforementioned eradication of contagious illnesses but also in the general growth in life expectancy. From 42.0 years in 1932 (Şandru 1980:203), it rose to 68.6 years in 1970-72 (Bucur et al.:2004:61),⁵ an increase of more than a quarter century in just over four decades.

Sorina's access to healthcare services under socialism stood in stark contrast to the challenges she and most of the other working-class pensioners I came to know faced in meeting their healthcare needs in the post-socialist era. Although, as I have already alluded to, it was the case that one often had to make payments in kind or in cash for services under socialism, everyone with whom I spoke described gratuities being far more cumbersome after 1989. Cash payment had become the norm, and the amounts one was expected to give were extraordinarily difficult for people to handle. They also spoke about paying for medical supplies and pharmaceutical drugs out of personal funds. These were ramifications of the broken state of the public healthcare system in good part due to a chronic gap in financing. This was one of the most persistent stressors for elderly people given their need for medical services as they grew older.

We learn as well about rural dwellers' access to education from Sorina's history. Primary schooling was already cost-free and mandatory during the interwar period (Hitchins op. cit.:344) and reforms in 1948 strengthened this policy (Kideckel op. cit.:82), so it was not clear to me why she had remembered a fee for schooling that her family could not cover. Perhaps she wanted to believe that there was more to the termination of her education than that her family and the state needed her to work the land. The decision may have also been gendered; had Sorina been male she may have been encouraged to continue with her studies especially since she had performed so well.

The urbanization of the heavily rural population of Romania during the socialist period as well emerges from this history. As noted, commuting between village and city was typical in the early years of industrialization following the Second World War but once apartments, schools, hospitals and clinics, public transit and other urban infrastructure were completed, people began to settle in Galați and other urban centers in Romania. In some cases, new apartments were outright given to blue collar workers in some industries, and if they had not been so fortunate, many people still recalled mortgage payments being reasonable.

This ownership was a source of stability for pensioners in the turbulent post-socialist period. Even if they were often stressed about not being able to pay for electricity, water, natural gas and building maintenance, they at least had a permanent home. This was not the case for the younger generation, for whom

⁵ The time frames for these figures vary according to the manner in which statistics were kept

home ownership was often out of reach. Some instead remained with their parents or moved back in with them when it became necessary because of their unstable employment situation.

In addition to learning about the material dimensions of pensioners' lives, people's sense of self emerged from the histories as well. The older people whom I came to know were generally very gratified with themselves because of their work and accomplishments, as we have seen in Sorina's case. Even with all its disadvantages, the socialist period did bring benefits to people of her social class background. The younger, working-class people I met in Galați told a very different story about themselves. Disappointment colored their memories more than a sense of having accomplished what they had imagined they would by that point in their lifetimes (most having been in their 30s or 40s when I spoke with them). This resulted in part from the deindustrialization of the city after the revolution. Young people's work lives were often in disarray because factories had ceased operating and jobs were scarce, forcing them to take up employment in the informal sector or in the low-paying service sector, and if this did not work out, they left the city entirely, seeking occupations in other parts of the country or abroad. They were also demoralized by the failure of the revolution to live up to its promises – instead of a better life, they struggled just like their elder kin to maintain even a basic standard of living.

6. Conclusions

This paper has briefly explored the "life history." I have attempted to demonstrate the value of this research method to scholars conducting research in the humanities. Many facets of life are unveiled through a life history. They assist us as well in more thoroughly understanding how society has changed and what people think of the transformations that have occurred. Overall they are a productive tool for learning about history and society.

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