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# TRANSILVANICA

## Romanian Families and Households in Northeastern Transylvania Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

ELENA CRINELA  
HOLOM



Woman with child, breastfeeding  
Rebra, Bistrița-Năsăud County, 1931  
(Photo by D. Galloway)

### **Elena Crinela Holom**

Senior researcher at the Center for  
Population Studies, Babeș-Bolyai  
University, Cluj-Napoca.

### **Introduction**

**T**HE FAMILY and the household make up the environment in which we spend a significant part of our lives, therefore these two notions have always been in the researchers' field of interest. Most of these studies are focused on family, as an important element of society (consisting of males, females and children), but also on households, as a co-residence group (besides the basic family, it could also include other relatives, servants, tenants etc.).

Because almost all of us grow up within a family, in a household, the study and the analysis of the two notions becomes

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even more justified. Moreover, lately, we have noticed a great openness towards this subject from both sociologists and historians. The former are increasingly interested in the multiple aspects of intergenerational issues and in the matter of old persons. They aim to discover whether several couples living together within a single household develop a strategy of adaptation to current economic conditions or if they are only subjected to a particular historical tradition. Also, concerning old persons, historians wish to find out how these persons were taken care of in the past and to what extent older people lived their lives within the same household together with close relatives. Historians, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe, are more and more pre-occupied to discover what households used to look like in the past, based on concrete and exact data, eliminating generalizations that classified households only as simple, nuclear or complex.

In the well-known 1965 scheme, which divided Europe into two distinctive camps according to the type of marriage, statistician John Hajnal brought into discussion the issue of household structure, arguing that it was more complex in Eastern and Central Europe than it was in the West and North.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the merit of placing the historical study of the household and of the family on factual bases belongs to the researchers from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. The book of Laslett and Wall, *Household and Family in Past Time*, proposed a standardized code classification of the domestic group, a manner of determination and classification, which would later be adopted by a series of researchers.<sup>2</sup>

Later, in the article published in 1982, Hajnal returned to the subject of the household, establishing the existence of some specific rules of structure. Simple households, usually encountered in the northwestern part of Europe, were characterized by late marriages, by the fact that after marriage the man used to become the head of the household and by the circulation of young people as servants before marriage. Regarding households with a complex structure, specific to the rest of Europe, marriage took place at an earlier age, the young couple starting their life alongside an older couple. In the case of households consisting of several couples, there was a tendency to split in order to form two or more households, each containing one or more couples.<sup>3</sup>

After applying this classification scheme on the available data, Laslett concluded that the nuclear type of family was a widespread feature for the western part of Europe, where households with a simple structure exceeded 75% of the total amount.<sup>4</sup>

Many researchers complained that he ignored the international disparities. A tougher critique was related to “murdering” the hypothesis concerning the existence of the stem family (sprout), without studying in depth those areas of Europe where the sociologist Frédéric Le Play (mid–19<sup>th</sup> century) suggested it might have existed (southern France, parts of Germany, Austria, northern Italy and Spain).<sup>5</sup>

The classification scheme developed by the Cambridge historians was used by many scientists as a starting point in the analysis focused on the issue of the composition and structure of the family and household. Moreover, the historiography of the Western area is extremely productive, with a large number of books<sup>6</sup> and well documented and scientifically valuable articles.<sup>7</sup>

Lately, these dichotomous schemes began to be increasingly questioned,<sup>8</sup> as researchers support, in fact, the existence of a variety of family systems in modern Europe. In order to achieve a high quality research, most historians based their investigations on consistent data extracted from databases. Information regarding households was collected from databases such as CEURFAMFORM Database,<sup>9</sup> Historical Sample of the Netherlands<sup>10</sup> or Mosaic.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, the demographic analysis increasingly focused on the individual<sup>12</sup> within an approach focusing on the course of life, also using longitudinal data.<sup>13</sup>

In the Romanian historical writing, the issue of the household is scarcely present. Generally speaking, the works completed until now support the preponderance of households with a complex structure for 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries Transylvania.<sup>14</sup> A very recent and well documented research has proved the supremacy, during the mid–19<sup>th</sup> century, of the simple households for two towns situated in the Szeklers area.<sup>15</sup>

For the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists support the idea that households generally used to have a simple structure (the case of the Transylvanian villages of Breb and Șanț). Households with a complex structure are found only in the areas inhabited by Slovaks in Transylvania, by Serbs in Banat and by Romanians in the former Austrian military border between Banat and Transylvania.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that researchers lack specific data, a shortcoming often recognized by the authors themselves, is further proof that based only on their works is impossible to draw relevant conclusions.

The fact that foreign researchers have associated the Romanian household either with the expanded household, or with the Balkan *zadruga*, or with the nuclear household specific for some parts of Hungary represents a serious motivation to start a research aiming to outline what the Romanian household actually looked like. Another important reason is related to the correction of certain inaccuracies launched by some researchers. For example, research carried out in the village of Șanț in 1936 by Roman Cresin speaks of the existence of a higher proportion of simple households,<sup>17</sup> while a relatively recent research, belonging to Gheorghe Șișeștean, speaks of the existence, even during the interwar period, of extended households, such as “house communions.”<sup>18</sup> The problem is that none of these researchers provide clear data in order to illustrate the share of households with a simple or complex structure. The fact that historical endeavors have so far pictured realities earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> century is another reason for launching an investigation to deal with the issue of the Transylvanian household at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**T**HIS PAPER is a case study on the households in the villages of Budești and Miceștii de Câmpie (Bistrița-Năsăud County) around the year 1901.<sup>19</sup> Located in the northeastern part of Transylvania, separated by a distance of 17 km, the two villages had in 1900 an ethnic structure defined by a Romanian majority of over 90%; over 90% of the population embraced the Greek-Catholic confession.<sup>20</sup>

The sources we used were printed books named “nominal assessments of souls.” Consisting of more “family sheets,” they present the main identification data on the family, such as the house number, and the name and occupation of the head of family. Besides this information, the sheets also contain data on “persons belonging to the family”: their full name, day, month and year of birth, marriage and death, religion, occupation and a column for comments. In addition, the name of the priest who prepared these records is also mentioned, as well as the starting date of their completion.

Based on this data, the main objective of our research is to outline some aspects regarding the households in the two villages in the year 1901. We want to see which was the average household size and the distribution according to size. We aim to capture the specific structural hypostases of the household. We would also like to reveal the relationship between marriage and establishing an independent household. And one last aspect we keep in mind concerns the relationship between the age of the head of household and its typology.

## The Household: Size and Structure

**I**N THE case of the analyzed villages, the average household size was 4.4 members in 1901. In 1925, households of the village of Poiana Ilvei had an average size of 4.5 members.<sup>21</sup> This average was very similar to the realities encountered in other areas of Southeast Europe. For instance, the Christian community of the Bulgarian village of Čepelare had, in 1920, an average household of 4.7 members,<sup>22</sup> and in the Serb village of Orašac, in 1928, the average size was of 4.82 members.<sup>23</sup>

The analysis of the households from Budești and Miceștii de Câmpie in 1901 revealed that the average household size was small. The situation was encountered, as we have seen, in other parts of Southeast Europe, and is similar to the one in England and Wales. Here, the average household size was of 4.49 members in 1901.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of the villages of Budești and Miceștii de Câmpie, the highest percentage was held by households consisting of 3–6 members (71.5%). Households consisting of only a single person had a modest percentage of only 0.9% (Table 1). The share of households consisting of only 2 persons was of 13.8%, and roughly the same percentage was held by households with a high number of people (7 or more).

All this illustrates the propensity towards creating families, ensuring the existence of heirs and mutual help in a society where life was difficult to bear alone.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the individual perspective showed a reduction in the share of people who lived alone or in smaller households, but led to an increase in the share of those who lived in large households. Thus, 69.3% lived within households consisting of 3–6 people, only 0.10% in households consisting of a single person and 6.28% in households consisting of 2 people. Nearly 25% of individuals lived within large households made up of more than 7 members.

However, the household size was very much influenced by the dynamics of births, marriages and deaths, a more thorough analysis of natural movement components being able to provide more comprehensive explanations in this direction. On the other hand, possible explanations for the household size in the cases of the analyzed villages can be found in the analysis of their structure.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS AND PERSONS BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE

	1901			
	Households		Individuals	
	N	%	N	%
1 person	3	0.9	3	0.19
2 persons	48	13.8	96	6.28
3–6 persons	248	71.5	1,060	69.3
7–8 persons	40	11.5	295	19.3
9 persons or more	8	2.3	74	4.8
TOTAL	347		1,528	

SOURCES: See note 19.

In order to identify the structural aspects specific for household size in the investigated villages based on the available data, the classification scheme of Laslett-Hammel has been applied.<sup>26</sup> They proposed the following categories: 1. solitaries (1a. widowed, 1b. single), 2. no family households (2a. co-resident siblings, 2b. other co-resident relatives, 2c. unrelated persons), 3. simple households (3a. married couple alone, 3b. married couple with children, 3c. widowers with children, 3d. widows with children), 4. extended family households (4a. extended upwards 4b. extended downwards 4c. extended laterally 4d. combinations), 5. multiple family households (5a. secondary units up, 5b. secondary units down, 5c. second unit laterally, 5d. frèrèches, 5e. combinations).

TABLE 2. HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE BASED ON CATEGORIES (%)

Categories	1901			
	Households		Individuals	
	N	%	N	%
1. Solitaries				
1.a Widowed	2	0.5	2	0.1
1.b Single	1	0.3	1	0.06
1. TOTAL	3	0.8	3	0.16
2. No family households				
2.a Co-resident siblings	2	0.5	6	0.4
2.b Other co-resident relatives	1	0.3	2	0.1
2.c Unrelated persons	7	2	28	1.8
2. TOTAL	10	2.8	36	2.3
3. Simple family households				
3.a Married couple alone	44	12.7	95	6.2
3.b Married couple with children	204	58.7	997	65.2
3.c Widowers with children	14	4	50	3.2
3.d Widows with children	24	6.9	99	6.4
3. TOTAL	286	82.4	1,241	81.3
4. Extended family households				
4.a Extended upwards	17	4.9	69	4.5
4.b Extended downwards	1	0.3	5	0.3
4.c Extended laterally	2	0.5	8	0.5
4.d Combinations	1	0.3	6	0.4
4. TOTAL	21	6.0	88	5.7
5. Multiple family households				
5.a Secondary units up	0		0	
5.b Secondary units down	22	6.3	130	8.5
5.c Secondary units laterally	0		0	
5.d Frères	4	1.1	25	1.6
5.e Combinations	1	0.3	5	0.3
5. TOTAL	27	7.7	160	10.5
1-5. TOTAL (%)		100		100
1-5. TOTAL	347		1,528	

SOURCES: See note 19.

The processed data showed that an overwhelming proportion (82.4%) of households had a simple structure: 58.7% were made of married couples with children, 12.7% of couples alone, 6.9% of widows with children and 4% of widowers with children (Table 2). A very similar structure was encountered during the period

1877–1928 in the case of the households from Široka Lăka and Čepelare. The analysis of these households located in Bulgaria showed that, in a proportion of 80.8% and 80.7%, their structure was a simple one.<sup>27</sup>

The same high proportion regarding the structure of the households was discovered in the village of Poiana Ilvei, where, in 1925, 73.6% of the households had a simple structure.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding other types of households, on the next position there were those with a multiple family structure (7.7%), closely followed by those with an extended family structure (6%). Most of the extended households included the widowed mother or father of the head of the family or similar descendants belonging to the spouse of the head of the family (households extended upwards). They also included the unmarried or widowed brothers of the husband or wife (households extended laterally). Perhaps, in this case we can speak of a cohabitation of several generations determined by the need to help old parents or younger orphaned brothers, or those who were widowed and alone.

Of the households in the Bulgarian village of Čepelare, 7.9% had an extended family structure during 1877–1928.<sup>29</sup>

Households with a multiple family structure represented up to 7.7% of all analyzed households. The most common form of cohabitation included households consisting of at least two generations—that of the married parents and the family of the married son/daughter (multiple households with the second unit downwards). Moreover, the cohabitation within the same household of some married couples of brothers (siblings, *frères*), even if it was not so common, was nevertheless identified in the analyzed villages.

In the case of the Bulgarian village of Čepelare, during the period 1877–1925, the percentage of households with a multiple family structure amounted to 6.8%, while in Široka lăka the percentage reached 7.1%.<sup>30</sup>

We consider that the presence of households with generations extended upwards and with multiple generations, having the second unit downwards, was linked to an intermediary transition process experienced by the household. It already included those meant to inherit the household, even if the actual accession to the status of “head of household” would occur only after the death of the elder head.

Households without a family structure represented a modest percentage of only 2.8%, and these usually consisted of unrelated persons or orphaned siblings. A percentage of 2.8% of the households from Čepelare had no family structure.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the share of single persons was almost insignificant (0.8%), most of them being widowed. In the case of Široka Lăka, the percentage was of only 0.9%.<sup>32</sup>

If we take into account individuals as a unit of analysis, the data is very similar to the one that targeted household as the unit of study. A more significant aspect that stands out is connected to the fact that 10.5% of the individuals inhabiting the two villages in 1901 lived within households with a multiple family structure.

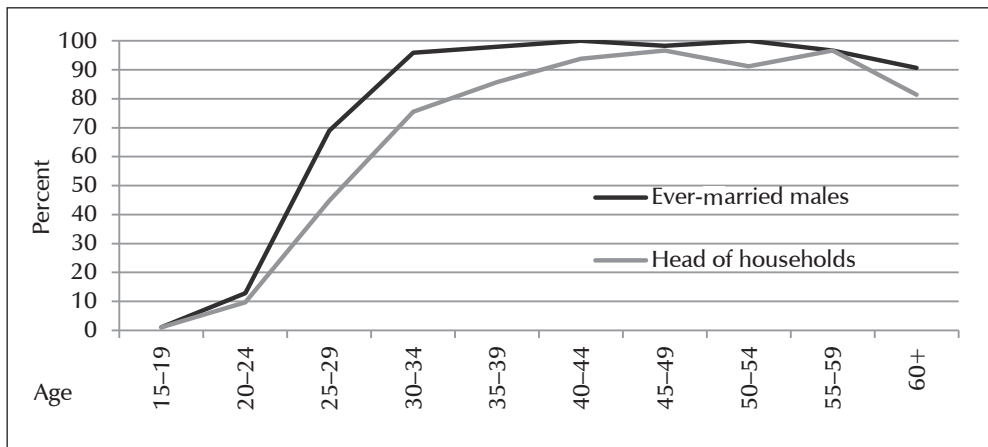


## The Relationship between Marriage and the Creation of an Autonomous Household

**A**N INDICATOR of the connection between marriage and the creation of an autonomous household is the relationship between the percentage of those married and those who are heads of families. Given the fact that most of the household heads were male, we applied the analysis only on to the male segment of the population.

The processed data show a significant increase in the number of married men after the age of 25. Therefore, of the total number of males 25 to 29 years of age, 69% were married, 45% being also heads of households, compared to 13% and 10% in the case of males with ages ranging between 20 and 24 years (Figure 1).

FIG. 1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEN'S MARRIAGE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AUTONOMOUS HOUSEHOLD, 1901



SOURCES: See note 19.

Moreover, for the 25–34 age group, among the 82.4% of married men, 60.1% were heads of families. In their case, marriage represented a new status: head of household. Other men began their marital life within extended or multiple households, where older persons, usually parents, held the supremacy.

The almost simultaneous achievement of becoming spouse and head of household role characterized the men belonging to the 40–59 age group, and especially those from the 55–59 age group. Concerning the latter category, out of 30 men, 29 were married and, at the same time, heads of households. It seems that the “withdrawal” from the position of head of family in some cases used to take place later, probably only on the occasion of death, given that among the 90.7% married men over the age of 60, 81.4% still led the household.

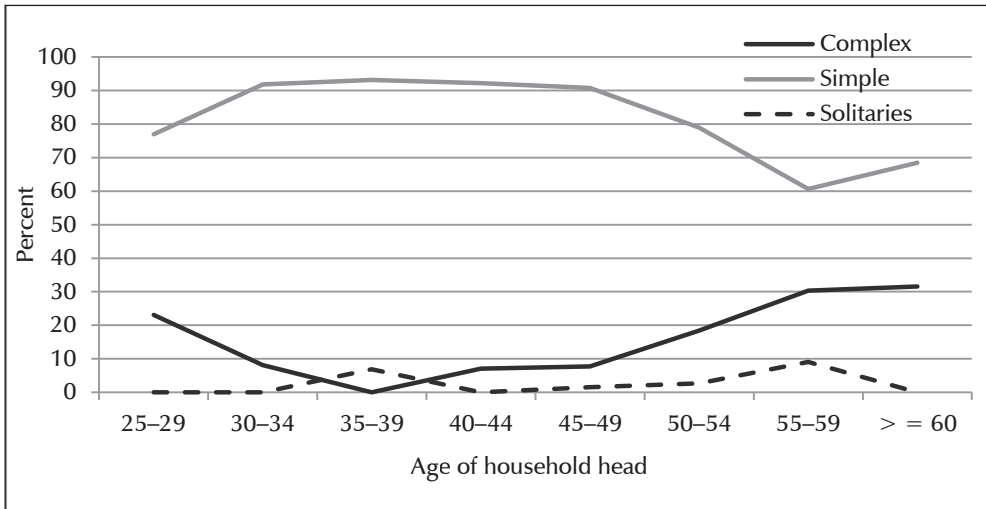


## The Age of the Head of Household and the Typology of the Domestic Group

**T**HE ASPECTS regarding the size and composition of domestic groups were not at all fixed issues. Throughout their lives, individuals experienced living within various types of households, and transitions from one form to another depended on a number of economic, social and cultural factors.<sup>33</sup>

What follows we analyze the relationship between the age of the head of household and the typology of the household, and in order to achieve this we established a series of categories. Extended and multiple domestic groups were graded as complex family groups, groups with a simple structure were placed in the simple category and single individuals and those living outside a family group category were placed in the solitary category.<sup>34</sup>

FIG. 2. THE PROPORTION OF SIMPLE AND COMPLEX FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS AND THOSE OF SOLITARIES BY THE AGE OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS



SOURCES: See note 19.

In 1901, most households had a simple structure (88%), being led by young people 20–49 years of age. On the other hand, about 27% of the complex households were headed by a person aged over 50. Also, solitary households became more numerous after the age of 50 (Figure 2).

## Conclusions

THE ANALYSIS of the households in the two villages around the year 1901 highlighted their small size (4–5 members). The dominant structure of the household was the simple one, mostly consisting of a married couple and children. Complex households were also present, but in a slightly lower proportion, as they were a form of support for the elderly, and an intermediate stage of accession to the position of head of the household. On the other hand, solitary life outside the family was not specific in the past in Budești and Miceștii de Câmpie.

The relationship between the percentage of married persons and those who were heads of household showed that marriage meant immediate accession to the position of head of household, but only for some men. The rest began their marital life within extended or multiple families where the supremacy was held by the parents, sometimes until a very old age.

The relationship between the age of the household head and its typology showed that most complex households were headed by older individuals, aged 50 or more, while simple households were headed, generally, by people younger than 50. However, solitary households were led in most cases by heads over 50 years of age. □

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## Abstract

### Romanian Families and Households in Northeastern Transylvania: Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

This paper is a demographic analysis of the Romanian household in Transylvania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The case study on the Greek-Catholic communities in Budești and Miceștii de Câmpie (Bistrița-Năsăud County) is based on the "nominal assessments of souls" from 1901. The processed information revealed that the domestic group was small (4–5 members) and that households with a simple structure predominated. Investigating the relationship between the percentage of married persons and those being heads of household showed that marriage meant immediate accession to the position of head of household, but only for some men. The others began their marital life within extended or multiple families, where supremacy belonged to parents, sometimes until a very old age. The relationship between the age of the head of household and its typology underlined that most of the complex households were headed by an old man, while households with a simple structure were led by a young person.

## Keywords

household size and structure, household formation, Transylvania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century