Food Crises and Their Implications on the Emigration Phenomenon in Transylvania

(18th Century-First Part of the 19th Century)

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PPROACHING AN issue such as the one chosen by us for the present paper requires one to draw on and interconnect two research topics that our historiography has long addressed in an unbalanced manner, namely the history of alimentation and historical demography. The first topic did not get much attention from Romanian historians during the 20th century. If in the first part of this century the historical writing was a militant one, assuming the role of bringing to public awareness the necessity of unifying the territories mainly inhabited by Romanians and, later, of defending with territorial arguments the territorial integrity of Greater Romania, after the advent of communism it was instrumentalized and used to serve the interests of this totalitarian regime. The broad topic of food, nutrition, and food shortages gained more attention after 1990, opening up new perspectives for understanding the past.

Completely different is the situation of the field of historical demography and of the component that interests us here, namely that of population departure from Transylvania. The issue of emigration of a part of the inhabitants of the province during the Middle Ages and the Modern Era has remained in the attention of the leading personalities of Romanian historiography. Historians like Ion Nistor, Ştefan Meteş, David Prodan, or Ştefan Pascu have devoted some of their efforts to investigating the mobility of the population in this area. Conjugated causes, of a political, economic, social nature or belonging to the vast field of natural calamities, operated constantly in this interval, generating outflows of population, mainly to Moldavia and Wallachia, but also to the Russian space or to the Hungarian plains.

A multitude of documents, of diverse origin, attests to the magnitude of this phenomenon. Most of them, whether we refer to the official ones (orders, circulars, printings, surveys) or to newspapers, chronicles, testimonies of foreign travellers passing through Transylvania, etc. indicate that among the factors most often invoked by those who left (either temporarily or permanently) their native places in search of an easier life was the one related to the impossibility of securing the necessary food supplies. Despite this fact, until now, the connection between emigration and the insufficiency or the temporary lack of food in a particular region has been approached only on rare occasions.

Addressing such issues can better clarify and explain the actions and behaviors of emigrants, allowing for a more accurate hierarchy of the triggering factors of the main waves and flows of emigration. Last but not least, such an approach proves to be particularly useful in reconstructing the history of the Romanian population in Transylvania, since much of it belonged to the dependent peasant categories (serfs) or, in any case, to the poor strata. The largest share of emigrants, therefore, came from the Romanian group, not by virtue of their numerical majority, but because of the precariousness of their material state. Thus, to a large extent, to approach the history of Transylvanian emigration means to focus first and foremost on the history of Romanians. Of course, among the migrants there were sometimes Hungarians, Szeklers, Armenians, etc., but their proportion was smaller.

Subsistence crises¹ in the Transylvanian world², triggered as everywhere by bad weather, with massive, rapid and negative implications on the agricultural sectors, led to spectacular increases in the prices for cereals and food, being accompanied by an increase in the number of deaths and a decrease in birth rates and marriage indexes. It was natural in these conditions that a part of the population, threatened by starvation or disease due to undernourishment, would try to find their salvation in other areas, usually in the neighboring ones where they were convinced that they would find sufficient food.

Strictly from the point of view of the relationship between food insufficiency and population outflows, it is obvious that the peaks of these demographic hemorrhages³ were reached during periods of famine. During the 18th century, these were often accompanied by surges in the death rates and induced a state of insecurity, generating a whole set of reactions and mental and behavioral attitudes. However, it has not always been necessary for a specific period of food deprivation in order for waves of population to decide to seek a better life elsewhere. Numerous documents attest to the fact that in some cases the years with poor harvests or with bad weather were sufficient to boost the phenomenon. It also turns out that the fear of hunger was stronger than the direct confrontation with its effects.

The time interval we focus on, exceeding the length of a century, allows for punctual approaches, related to those periods in which the food crises manifested themselves with particular virulence, and also lasted longer (according to the scheme proposed by Fernand Braudel). The period is uniform from many points of view. It coincides with the installation and later consolidation of the Habsburg regime and its efforts to modernize the Transylvanian society; then comes a gap dominated by rural life, with a population that in a huge proportion lived and worked in thousands of villages; daily existence was carried out within the framework of an "old biological regime" permanently challenged by all kinds of diseases and driven by the obsession to provide the daily food; last but not least, this period saw a constant and massive (especially after 1750) population growth. The urban records, the civil status registers, and the census taken during the time of Joseph II unanimously attest to this demographic revolution.

Due to the rapid increase in the number of people, the situation in the Transylvanian world quickly reached a point where there was a tension between the new mouths that had to be fed and the amount of food that the province could produce or bring in from the neighboring territories. Despite the fact that many of the ideas that Thomas Robert Malthus presented in his work "An Essay on the Principle of Population" have been chal-

lenged ever since its publication (in 1798), a large number of them are confirmed in the case of the Transylvanian space. The most important in our case is precisely that of the demographic-economic or demography-food correlation. In the studied period, the ratio between economic resources (food) and the demographic volume of the province was a fragile one, leading in many cases to "clashes" between the total mass of the population and the quantity of available food⁵. Despite noticeable progress and the development of Transylvanian agriculture (due to the growth of cultivated areas and in livestock, the introduction of new crop plants, such as potatoes, etc.)⁶, production and yields continued to remain modest, maintaining at the provincial level a period of food stress.

Emigration due to famine is recorded in large numbers for the 17th century. In the very beginning, the phenomenon was so serious that Prince Sigismund Rákóczi was forced to intervene with the Moldavian voivode Constantin Movilă to determine those who had gone there to return and to harden the conditions of entry into Moldavia⁷. Despite the efforts of the central authorities to improve the food situation and prevent population losses, the situation remained unchanged. Receiving information that due to the lack of food the poor had begun to cross massively into Moldavia, Prince Mihail Apaffy was forced to resort to harsh measures, ordering the strengthening of security at the border⁸. The proportion of those who left for the urban areas is very well documented, many inhabitants of some Transylvanian villages being recorded as having left due to poverty and various shortages⁹.

The end of the 17th century and the first years of the following coincided with the Habsburg offensive against the Ottoman Empire in Southeast Europe. In this context Transylvania, became an integral part of the new Danube empire. The repeated victories of the Habsburg armies and especially the presence of troops in a few Transylvanian cities demanded from the province the payment of a huge amount of money, but also the obligation to provide these military units with wheat, food, fodder, etc. The prolongation of the state of war and then the outbreak of the movement led by Francis Rákóczi II would further drain the resources of the province, leaving the vast majority of the population on the verge of poverty and unable to provide food.

The increased mobility of the population in this period (soldiers moving to various battlefields or relocated according to the strategy of the parties engaged in conflict, civilian refugees fleeing from the battles or in order to escape conscription) favored the appearance of the plague in 1709. Against the background of some climate anomalies, the plague was instantly accompanied by a period of famine which continued into the following year.

The memory of this period has been recorded in many documents. Most of them refer to the amount of contributions, to the series of horrors that were inflicted on the inhabitants and their vulnerability to this assault. The number of records that directly refer to the relationship between the lack of food/famine and emigration is not very large, but the logic of things leads to the conclusion that this chain worked and that the proportion of the phenomenon was consistent. It is also confirmed by the annotations on the pages of the old church books. In one of them, for example, we read that due to the "wickedness" in Transylvania, the plain of Criş Negru and that of Giula had become deserted¹⁰.

The years that followed the suppression of the anti-Habsburg uprising brought peace to Transylvania, but the material condition of the inhabitants continued, paradoxically,

to worsen. The involvement of the Habsburgs in the conflict with the Ottomans (1716) repeated the scenario from the early years of the century: requisitions for the army, quartering, ordinary and extraordinary taxes. In 1717 the lands of Sătmar, Maramureş and Bistriţa suffered from a Tatar invasion. Occurring at a peak in the agricultural calendar (during the harvest) it significantly disturbed the lives of the inhabitants along the invaders' route. A document confirms that Bistriţa and 23 neighboring localities experienced a rapid increase in the price of food, and then a severe famine that caused many hungry people to seek salvation in Moldavia or elsewhere¹¹.

Things were further aggravated by the outbreak of the plague in the southern parts of Transylvania, which exacerbated the food problem, including through bans on commercial activities ¹². The drought also aggressively manifested itself in those years. In this context, of particular relevance is a document that says that many inhabitants of the land of Bârsa, faced with the effects of the lack of precipitation and the lack of food for the livestock, were forced to take their livestock and go to Wallachia¹³. This clearly shows the concern of livestock owners to try to save them at any cost. Although apparently the hunger of the people was not the triggering factor of the emigration, it can be inferred from their desperation to take their animals to a region where they could be saved. It is not specified exactly what type of livestock was transferred to Wallachia, but the owners knew that they were providing food (milk, meat) and the main source of energy. In the absence of the beasts of burden, the lands were at risk of being left untilled and the famine could deepen.

In all these years (1717-1719), amid unfortunate conditions (bad weather, plague, famine), the demographic effects were very visible. According to a survey from 1721, one third of the agricultural lands were deserted or uncultivated¹⁴. Beyond the deaths caused by disease and starvation, population losses were certainly due to the emigration caused by the subsistence crisis of that period. Surprisingly, the chronicler Radu Tempea in his history dedicated to the church in Şcheii Braşov does not provide information concerning this phenomenon. He states instead that the city of Braşov was declared closed for several days¹⁵. This information is confirmed by the priest Nicolae Grid¹⁶. Together, they can persuade us that the number of emigrants was at least partly limited by the quarantine measures imposed and by the closing of border crossing points to Wallachia or Moldavia. Even if it turns out that this is the case, the number of those who left Transylvania was high. The authorities in Caransebeş, for example, were forced to reduce the amount of the contribution imposed to this district, also affected by the failure of several crops and the intensity of the emigration¹⁷.

The growth of the population and the pressure placed by it on agriculture became increasingly evident towards the middle of the 18th century. The inability to increase agricultural production by intensive methods determined the nobiliary domains, but also a part of the rural population, to try to increase their production by expanding the cultivated areas. Soon the biological hunger was to be followed by a hunger for land. An attempt to pass into Moldavia by some peasants from Bistriţa area in 1763 determined the local authorities to carry out an investigation which led to information about the number of those who wanted to emigrate, about their equipment with gunpowder and bullets, and so on. Asked about the reasons why he wanted to go to Moldavia, a

serf said that he had been lured by the hope that he would find enough places for farming and tax exemptions there¹⁸. The lack of arable land and the increase in its importance also results from the fact that in many cases, in their drive to increase production, the nobles increased the work obligations of the peasants, made them difficult, seized the deforested lands and allotted the peasants but little land from which "they cannot feed themselves". The examples above can be supplemented by others that in turn confirm the pressure put by people on the geographical environment in order to increase the arable area (through deforestation, drying, etc.). Unfortunately, however, the new lots thus introduced into the agricultural circuit were often marginal, with poor soils and, consequently, poorly productive, unable to provide the necessary food surplus.

Invoking the scarcity of arable land as a pretext for leaving Transylvania was presently accompanied by the old reasons, insistently repeated in so many moments, indicating that food was not enough or that the weather was bad and had made difficult or prevented the agricultural work, diminished the harvest, or extended the "welding" (that is the time interval within a year between two successive harvests).

For example, in 1741 several people from Bistrita, who were in an unbearable situation, complained to the government that the heavy winter and the excessive rainfall had led a the grain shortage, and therefore many residents were waiting for spring "to go out into the world". Other sources confirm this fact. In one of them, made by a priest, it was written that recently many people had left towards the Hungarian plains, from several localities, in groups of up to 35 people²⁰. The Transylvanian documents attesting to the passage of persons to the neighboring regions are supplemented by those coming from the witnesses who lived in the regions where they settled. In this regard, in the spring of 1763, Iosif M. Cambioli, the prefect of the Catholic mission in Moldavia, said that "for seven years (since 1756) the number of our Catholics has grown and increased every day, not because the Catholics pass to us, but because in Hungary and especially in Transylvania there has been a great famine"21. A decade later, in a document submitted by the representatives of the Uniate clergy of Transylvania to Empress Maria Teresa, they argued that the residents of Moldavia and Wallachia, impressed by the large numbers of Transylvanian emigrants, came to the conclusion that "All of Transylvania is coming to us!" (tota Transilvania ad nos venit!).

The vulnerability in terms of sustenance of a part of the population and the use of this state as a pretext for leaving Transylvania were probably directly observed by Emperor Joseph II himself during his visits to this region. Eager to ascertain the state of his possessions, as well as the hardships that the subjects faced in their daily life, he had the opportunity during the nearly three months he spent in Banat, Transylvania and Maramureş in 1783 to discover and record in the journal prepared for this occasion numerous situations in which food was scarce or lacking (the record of 17 May), that the lands were few and of poor quality (the record of 19 May), that the scarce harvests frequently led to emigration and that in order to stop it one needed to set clear deadlines until which those who had gone away would be received back (the record of 22 May), that frequently the powerful took over the lands of the weak (the notes of 2 and 9 June), etc. That the emigration phenomenon reached high levels under these conditions does not surprise anyone.

Among the measures taken by the Habsburg state at that time were the issuing of brochures (including in Romanian) through which a better knowledge of the causes of this phenomenon was disseminated, or the introduction of penalties for those who crossed the border, rewards for providing information capable of preventing such attempts, etc. In such a document published in 1787 the problem of the inability to ensure the minimum nutrition was indicated as being the first pretext invoked by those who left Transylvania. The identification of the causes immediately required and offered viable solutions. Thus, in the opinion of the authors of this text, all local authorities (the provincial administration, the committees, etc.), but also the nobles had to make efforts to ensure to everyone the daily food (including through the introduction of hemp, flax and wool processing workshops)²³; the rigor with which the document was drawn up is also proven by the fact that it provided for a punishment of one year of work for the benefit of the community for those who helped with food or money those who left the country²⁴.

Emigration having as a triggering factor the lack of food seems to have declined at the passing from the 18th to the 19th century. However, it would flare up again and reach levels never seen before during the severe food crisis that hit the Transylvanian world between 1813 and 1817. Triggered by several factors that acted cumulatively or concomitantly and amplified by adverse weather conditions (especially excessive rainfall), this would be the hardest period of famine in the entire modern period. It was accompanied by a rapid increase in food prices, with important consequences on mentalities, remaining alive for a long time in the memory of those who lived it, but also of their descendants. The demographic effects were also immediately noticeable: the drop in birth rates was accompanied by an increase in mortality and in the emigration rate of those deprived of food. The proportions of the phenomenon can be quite accurately inferred from many documents. In the summer of 1816, for example, in the territory of Beius alone, 2000 abandoned houses were identified and a decrease in population by over 3000 families²⁵. The Czirakyan Conscription of 1820 also offers numerous declarations by some inhabitants of Bucium, Gârbova de Sus, Geoagiul de Sus, Porumbacul de Jos (all located in Alba County), which attests that due to poverty and the departure of some villagers there were many uncultivated or abandoned areas²⁶.

The records in the church books also confirm the huge exodus: in one of them (Răchitova, Hunedoara County) it is written that people ate even bark flour and corn stalks and that many fled to Banat because of the shortages²⁷. George Bariţiu spoke of "thousands of inhabitants" who emigrated due to lack of food²⁸; the missionary Ercolani estimated the number of those who crossed into Wallachia to 20,000 families of Greek Catholic Romanians²⁹; finally, the number of those who crossed into Bukovina and Moldavia was estimated in another source to one third of Transylvania's inhabitants³⁰.

The consequences of this significant depopulation would emerge shortly: uncultivated land, suspended exports, lower revenues from imports, etc.³¹ The central authorities could not tolerate such a situation. Among the measures taken to rectify things were those aimed at blocking emigration. An important role in transmitting the message from the center to the periphery was reserved to the priests. They were to advise the believers in the church that they should refrain from such attempts. In order to make things more efficient, for example, they tried to inoculate the idea that fleeing to Moldavia was not a solu-

tion to their problem and that this province was also facing serious food problems³². Of course, there was no shortage in the efforts of convincing those affected by famine that instead of leaving their homes the most suitable solution was to return to God and the full confidence that he would bless the poor with sufficient food³³.

After these tragic years of the second decade of the 19th century, famine itself would play an increasingly smaller role in the demography dynamics of the Transylvanian world. Instead of the years when food was lacking, the documents would mostly record periods when it was in small quantities or expensive. These reasons, for example, determined a number of 10 families of Transylvanians to settle in Ceraşi (Prahova). Looking for a better life there, they saw their hopes dashed, and in 1834 they asked the authorities in Wallachia for permission to return to Transylvania³⁴. Indeed, it should be noted that in many cases the passage of inhabitants from here to the surrounding areas for reasons related to the (temporary) insufficiency of food supply was short-lived and that when a new and rich harvest solved this issue, those who departed come back.

Therefore, among the multitude of reasons invoked by documents as generating or amplifying the phenomenon of emigration of a part of the Transylvanian population during the 18th century and in the first years of the next one, the various food crises played a major role. Sometimes alone, they caused important segments of the (poor) population to leave Transylvania. Most of the time, however, they acted in combination with other causes. It is certain, however, that by taking various forms (scarcity of staple foods, their inaccessibility for many inhabitants due to very high prices or years of famine) they were constantly invoked by those who left the province or by the authorities. To simplify things, we could say that the years with rich crops and sufficient food were those in which the population dynamics (emigration, but also deaths or births) was calm and flat, and those in which subsistence was provided with difficulty and in which food was insufficient were characterized by quantitative losses of population and by an intensification of the emigration phenomenon.

Notes

- This concept was coined by Jean Meuvret, Les crises de subsistances et la démographie de la France d'Ancien Régime, in Population, no. 4 / 1946, 643-650; Steven L. Kaplan, Les subsistances et l'Ancien Regime: l'oeuvre de Jean Meuvret, in Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisation, no. 2/1981, 294-300.
- 2. It should be noted here that the problem of undernourishment in this space was not specific only to the medieval and modern period, but also to the contemporary period. The material burdens and the outbreak of diseases caused by little and inappropriate food gave birth in Bihor, for example, to social movements violently suppressed by the authorities in 1949. (Corina Moisa, Gabriel Moisa, Potere e immagini della violenza nella Romania communista: Scenario repressivo e clinico delle rivolte contadine di Bihor (1949), in Transylvanian Review, vol. XXIV, Supplement no. 2., 2015, 96-104); in the last years of the communist regime, the life of most of the population was marked by food and other types of shortages, causing many Romanians to flee abroad (Gabriel Moisa, Corina Moisa, Under the Sign of Malnutrition.

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Abstract

Food Crises and Their Implications on the Emigration Phenomenon in Transylvania (18th Century–First Part of the 19th Century)

During the entire 18th century and during the first part of the next one Transylvania was confronted with repeated food crises (shortages due to poor crops and yields, weather conditions, sometimes with intervals of famine, etc.). The difficulties in purchasing food were frequently amplified by the high prices at which food was sold, which made life difficult for the poor people. The reaction of a part of the inhabitants of the Transylvanian area to this situation was that of leaving the province (temporarily or permanently) in search of places that could ensure their livelihood. Most left for Moldavia and the Wallachia, but there were cases of crossings to the Hungarian plains, to the Russian area, etc. There were situations in which their emigration was determined only by the scarcity or lack of available food. In many others, the triggering factors of the emigration trend were more complex, as religious, social, economic and other factors, along with the food shortages, combined to increase the phenomenon. Our study aims to analyse the relationship between the food crises in this area and the emigration trend, making an inventory of them and outlining how the authorities, guided by populist principles, related to this challenge.

Keywords

emigration, famine, population, Transylvania, food, crisis