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Being Wife and Husband during World War I A Transylvanian Cultural Perspective

*“I have never felt more
acutely and more intensely
how happy I am to have you
and our babies than during
this terrible war.”*



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ON 28 July 1914, general mobilization was declared in Austria-Hungary. When this news reached the Transylvanian Romanian Sextil Pușcariu, he was in Techirghiol, by the Black Sea. He had travelled there from Chernivtsi, where he was a professor at Francis Joseph University, hoping to spend a few days with his family at the seaside. Given the situation, he could either remain in Romania, where both he and his family would be safe, or cross the border into Transylvania, to enlist in the Austro-Hungarian Army. He decided, not without some internal strife, to go to the front, driven by a single motivation: duty.¹ A few days later, another Romanian Transylvanian, Mihai Dan, a peasant from Maramureș with six years of primary school education, received the news of general mobilization while he was working in the fields. For him, there was no possibility to choose from different courses of action. The emperor's order demanded that he should report for duty within 24 hours. On 1 August 1914, he enlisted for the front, but not

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before making a will in which he left half of his wealth to his wife and the other half to the village church.²

Apparently, these two individuals had nothing in common. They came from two diametrically opposed regions in Transylvania: Braşov and, on the other side of the Tisza River, Maramureş. They also came from different social milieus: one was a university professor, the other a peasant, with minimal education or formal training. While the former had had the opportunity to avoid the war, the other had been forced to leave for the front. However, the war would draw them together. Both of them would have to bear the heavy burden of the four years of war, fighting on the fronts of Serbia and Italy. For both of them, going to war meant fulfilling their “duty” to emperor and nation.

Above all, however, the striking similarity between them was that they had, indeed, left for the battlefield, but had also left their hearts behind. Both Sextil Puşcariu and Mihai Dan were married. Like in the case of many soldiers who had enlisted for the front, their wives and children remained at home. For four years, their families were to play a crucial role in providing them with moral support. The question that may be raised is how many of the nearly one million soldiers recruited from Transylvania in World War I had left wives and children at home? For how many of them was the war to bring about changes in their civilian status, feelings and psycho-emotional behavior?

In the absence of complete data for Transylvania, we shall confine ourselves to invoking Martha Hanna’s estimates in this regard. According to Hanna, at least 40% of the soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian Army were married.³ Most of them found solace and support in their wives and children. They were the pillars of the imaginary universe into which the soldiers could escape the horrors of the war whenever the atrocities and the squalor of the front overwhelmed them. Not incidentally, the war propaganda speculated the sentimental value of the married couple and its motivational force, associating the fight for defending the homeland with the fight for protecting the family. There were, however, cases in which marital dysfunctions (infidelity, abandonment, carelessness) meant that the soldier no longer regarded his marriage as a beacon of light and as something worth fighting for. This often led to demoralization, desertion, suicide, etc.

Therefore, if we admit that the Great War was a total war, which profoundly and dramatically changed the world, we may wonder what its impact was on couple relations and couple dynamics. To what extent did the relations between the husbands fighting on the front and the wives who remained at home mobilize or demoralize the combatants?

The very recent studies authored by Martha Hanna,⁴ Susan Grayzel⁵ and Françoise Thébaud⁶ have brought into question the problem of gender relations during the Great War, examining it from several perspectives and focusing in particular on the Western European countries. With some exceptions,⁷ there are very few such

investigations on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the different levels of socio-economic and cultural development influenced gender relations and their evolution during the war. Despite its cultural and historical potential, this topic has been virtually ignored in Romanian historiography. Investigating the war from this perspective can reveal the experiences and the challenges faced by married couples during the war. The aspects that can be explored through these lenses include the efforts made by husbands and wives to alleviate the effects of the physical and existential distances between them, the temporary/permanent changes that affected their lives as couples and their success or failure in coping with the stress of a long-distance marriage. These were just a few of the great “tests” married couples had to go through in times of war.⁸

As regards Transylvania, it should be noted that reconstructing the image of couple relations during the years of the war will reveal many similarities with the fronts of Western Europe, but also distinctive aspects that were specific to this area. For instance, just like in France, the United Kingdom or Germany, in Transylvania communication within couples and the couples’ interests revolved around three main themes: family, economy (husbandry) and affection/love.⁹ Here too, just like in all the warring countries, connections between the internal and the external front were ensured by the postal services (letters, postcards, packages). Soldiers could be granted furlough or military leave and their wives could be allowed to make visits to the front. What individualized the case of Transylvania was the different share of these three major themes in the communication between the spouses or, sometimes, the difficulties in communication between the wife and the husband, which negatively affected couple relations.

Couple Life in Transylvania at the Time of World War I Economic Support, Emotional Compassion and Sexual Intimacy

WHILE IN the letters of the British, French or Germans soldiers who came from an urban environment the recurrent theme of their correspondence with their wives concerned their feelings of mutual love/affection or the insecurity and anxieties generated by the war, the subject that was devoted the amplest space in the letters the Romanian soldiers from Transylvania sent to their wives was the farmstead. This subject was followed by the interest in the welfare of their families and children and, only in the last instance, by affection or love, professed, most of the times, in a rather veiled and crude style.

Thus, we may find among these peasant soldiers a sort of “reverse” order of priorities and feelings compared to the soldiers who came from the urban areas. For the soldiers recruited from the Romanian villages, the farmstead and the land they owned were the mainstays of existence. This was due to the prevalently agricultural

nature of the Transylvanian economy and to the Romanian ethos, according to which husbandry and industriousness represented the attributes of a normal and secure life.¹⁰ From this standpoint, love was a mere particularizing element, a guarantee of familial prosperity and equilibrium.

It is well known that many of the combatants who came from Transylvania were peasants. Those of Romanian ethnicity amounted to more than half of the total number of Transylvanian soldiers. Their socio-cultural profile described them as individuals who were organically bound to their families, to their land and the agricultural work they constantly carried out, and not least, to the universe of their own communities. This explains why more than 50% of their correspondence referred to the farmstead and the economic difficulties caused by the war.¹¹ Mobilized to the front, they had left their households into the care of their wives and parents, who were powerless and demoralized and hardly managed to cope with the situation. Forced requisitions, fund-raising collections and the inflation that scourged the Transylvanian villages soon brought about shortages, dietary and clothing restrictions and, not infrequently, the frittering away of the little wealth they had left back home.¹² This explains why their overpowering concern was focused, in their correspondence, on the farmstead and the economic situation of the wives and the families they had left behind. Care was the chief feeling they experienced. The welfare of the cattle, the progress of agricultural work, the necessary firewood, the aid received from the state, and the health of the wife and the children: these were the “components” of life these soldiers lived vicariously, from a distance. Here is what one of the soldiers wrote to his wife: “Dear wife, as soon as you get this postcard, do send me news about how you’re managing with the kids and the cattle, and what else has happened at home, for you and the kids and the cattle are always on my mind.”¹³ Another soldier, worried about the financial situation of his wife, wrote to the village notary: “Dear Mr. Notary, I humbly pray that when you give money to the wives, you should pay the money to my wife but only the necessary amount to my mother.”¹⁴ Naturally, the wives’ answers approached the same topics, as most of them wished to inform their spouses about the social and economic difficulties with which they were confronted. This is the reply Maria Pop sent her husband in November 1914: “Dumitru, my dear . . . I have so far received money three times and I gave 10 zloty to the son of Iarie Amarocului and I also paid whomever we were indebted to and the priest took 3 pounds of maize and he said I’d have to pay one more, and they collected the taxes I owed to the village.”¹⁵

Aron Bârzovan received equally worrisome news from his wife, who wrote that: “I got seventeen zlotys but it’s really hard ‘cause the maize is mighty expensive, worth three zloty per krone a *merța*¹⁶ and I can’t keep the pig, so do write to me what I should do, if I should slaughter or sell it, write to me what I should do, my dearest. . . . And I have sown wheat on uncle’s plot, across the hill, and I had to plough a furrow for he didn’t plough one and everything has become terribly expensive. . . .”¹⁷

This image of the peasant family, beset by shortages and difficulties, reveals the force with which the wives made their presence felt in history. They did their utmost to cope with the manifold needs of the home front. They had to be both father and mother to their children, to step into the shoes of their husbands whenever necessary, to continue to pray, cry and hope that someday their husbands would return to resume their lives as couples from where they had been interrupted at the onset of the war. One of the most interesting testimonies in this regard belonged to Saveta, a peasant woman from Aiud, who wrote to her husband about the activities she had carried out in the farmstead in his absence:

*Toader, my dear, please know that I've made that contract for the land with Crăveanu and, Toader, my dear, please know that I have to pay the taxman 16 zloty and one krone 'cause they won't let me register that land in our name unless I pay that money. Also, I'll have you know, Toader, my dear, that we sowed the maize yesterday and Ion also came with two ploughs to help us . . ., also, I'll have you know, Toader, my dear, that I'll be taking the calves to the market in Aiud, 'cause I need money to pay for the contract and for the piglets from Maricica. And you wrote that I should come see you, but I can't, not before Pentecost, 'cause there's no one to look after my dad's place, your folk can't come 'cause they're working in the fields, but I'll be coming at Pentecost with Pătruțu, 'cause he misses you much and he dreams about you all night long. And will you please write to me if I should sell the cattle or the piglets, for one of the cows is really thin and the little one is sick all the time and we can't keep it anymore, 'cause it's limping now. And I'll have you know, Toader, that the crops are fine but there are plenty of weeds.*¹⁸

The letter above illustrates as convincingly as possible that although the war had forced this wife to take initiatives and measures that would far have exceeded her powers in times of peace, she was still hesitant in making all these decisions on her own, especially when it came to the livestock, which her husband had entrusted into her care when he had left for the front. The decisions regarding the farmstead and its future were the most difficult. That is why her lack of experience and the unpredictability of the war years led her to seek the advice and consent of her husband, who had gone to war. In these letters, almost without exception, the wives consulted their husbands regarding what they should do on the farmstead. The effect was to maintain their husbands' morale at a high level, as they were led to believe that in the microcosm of their homes, changes could only occur with their consent. In addition, all those details related to the spring, summer and autumn agricultural campaigns, the plots that were cultivated and the quantities of seeds that were planted were meant to "divert" the soldiers' attention from the atrocities and terrifying images of the front. Based on these snippets of the situation back home, the soldiers could reconstruct a reality from which they attempted to expel the proximity of death.¹⁹

The second major level on which couples attempted to stay in touch on during the war was emotional compassion. The terrifying climate and the injuries of the soldiers on the front, or the strenuous physical activities their wives had to carry out on the home front were just some of the reasons why emotional compassion in the couple was important. The epistolary exchanges between the spouses represented the means through which emotion and sympathy could cross the invisible border between the internal and the external front. “And when I heard they shot you, I was much aggrieved and I cried,”²⁰ one wife confessed to her husband. Others complained about the burden of chores on the farmstead and the ailments they suffered from on that account: “And let me add, my husband, that I have no one to complain to if something hurts me, I just keep my mouth shut and go to bed and cry my heart out until I fall asleep. Alas, I am now forced to work at the road, but let me add, my husband, working would be just fine but I’m much afraid I may come down with some sickness in my chest.”²¹ Much fewer and more laconic in comparison to the reports of their wives, the information the husbands conveyed about their wounds and infirmities came mostly from those who were in hospitals. Most of the times, the seriousness of their injuries was deliberately minimized so as not to generate panic and stress in the couple and in the family.

Children occupied a privileged place in the epistolary exchanges between the spouses. They represented the only category of humans that soldiers could trust without reservation. From this point of view, children differed substantially from the wives, who could be suspected of adultery by the soldiers.²² Defenseless children genuinely needed their fathers’ protection and affection. Above all, the father figure was the only legitimate model for the boys. This is probably why most wives insistently communicated to their husbands, who were on the front, information about their children and their needs. “Epistle written on December 27. My Beloved husband, so far we have all been healthy, I and Găvriluță too, and we keep praying to the good Lord that He should also grant you the same. . . but if you could see Găvriluță, you wouldn’t recognize him anymore, for he’s as fat as a miller’s horse and as tall as the table and can ask for anything that he needs, and he’s so dear to my soul ‘cause he goes by the gate to the yard and keeps crying “daddy, come home,” and, my sweet and dear Ioan, if you should get better, do ask them to let you come home for Christmas or move you to a closer hospital.”²³

The image of the child, constantly invoking the name of its father, who was away on the front, was very emotionally charged. It offered the soldiers an opportunity to seek mental refuge back home, helping them to maintain, from a distance, their status as husbands and fathers. In addition, it helped them to visualize how their children were growing, month after month, how they played and eagerly waited for their fathers to return home. It was up to the mothers to develop this image and convey it to their husbands, in order to reduce the distance between them and prepare the moment when they would be meeting again. Highly suggestive, in this

regard, is a letter a Romanian woman from Bistrița sent to her husband, telling him that their son had been waiting, night after night, for him to return home and buy him a hat and some shoes: “And I would be very happy if you could come home for 3 days at least, so that I may see you once more and then die, and let Giță see you too, ‘cause he won’t forget you, he’s been reading the postcards you sent us all day every day and keeps saying that daddy will be coming tonight and bring a hat and shoes to Giță, and my heart really aches to hear him say that.”²⁴

If the farmstead and emotional compassion occupied generous spaces in the war correspondence of these couples, this was not the case with sentimental and sexual intimacy. Love and sexual intercourse were subjects that could not be stated in writing except in a veiled and subtle form. Love had to be experienced far from the eyes of the world. That is why most of these letters contained few references to the private sentimental life of the couples and almost no references to their sexual intimacy. The explanation lies, first of all, in the moral and cultural education of those prevalently agrarian communities for which the sheer verbalization of love was an intimate act in itself. In addition to this, their low level of education and even illiteracy meant that the letters sent by the husband or the wife required the presence of an intermediary: the person who wrote or read the letters. Declaring their love or sexual desires under the eyes of the one who wrote the letter would have amounted to exposing and sharing their private sentiments with everyone else. That explains why most of those who could not write or read preferred to repress their intimate feelings and impulses in the letters, expressing them only during furlough or military leave. Seen from this perspective, leaves and holidays provided them with occasions in which, albeit for a few days, their emotional lives could be replenished.²⁵ That is why these occasions were so desired by the couples. For instance, here is what the wife of one of the soldiers wrote: “And, my dearest husband, I wish so fondly they would let you come home, if only I could kiss your lips, for my heart is badly broken. Do ask them to let you come for the holidays. . .”²⁶ The wife of Ambrozie, another Romanian Transylvanian soldier, was consumed with the same longing, for she wrote to him in November 1914: “I pray, thee, postcard, rush to meet Ambrozie, for I love speaking to him in letters, but I’d love even more to speak to him with my mouth! If only I could be with you at the beginning of Lent at least, it would be a godsend if you were around me and the children, like other Christians are. And ask them, Ambrozie, with all your heart to let you come home at least by Ash Wednesday.”²⁷

Especially during the major holidays, such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, but also during moments of despair and suffering, the couples experienced their relationship with much greater emotional intensity, despite their separation. Emblematic, in this respect, are the letters in which the wives asked their husbands to request their superiors to allow them to come home on leave for Christmas or at the beginning of Lent. “And I wish you would come home for Christmas, if not sooner. . ., dear Aron,”²⁸ as one of the Romanian women in Transylvania wrote to her husband, in the autumn of 1914.

For the married soldiers, military leave was also a means of checking if their wives had been faithful to them, as they were sometimes suspected of infidelity during the long months of separation caused by the war. Moreover, it is widely recognized that unlike the children, who could be trusted unconditionally,²⁹ the wives sometimes represented, in the soldiers' vision, potential "traitors." Sentimental betrayal could be accompanied by sexual infidelity, through which the husband was bereft of the fundamental right he had obtained through marriage, that of having exclusive relations with the woman entrusted to him. Adultery was a reality that was quite frequently encountered during the war.³⁰ For instance, Sextil Pușcariu recounted to his wife in a letter how one of the sergeants in his unit had discovered, while he was on leave, "that his wife had cheated on him with a soldier. He confronted her and she admitted it. He forgave her, after she promised him she would be faithful," but she relapsed shortly afterwards, ravaging their wealth and their children.³¹ Such situations were often the target of their comrades' mockery on the front, to which the cuckolded husbands had to resign themselves. This was the case of a Gypsy from Biserica Albă who, while he was on the front in Italy, received a letter from a relative back home, informing him that his wife, Safta, had given birth to a son, even though he had not been on home leave since the war had broken out. Two years had passed since then.³²

Although most of these suspicions proved to be unfounded, the fear of being deceived was one of the married soldiers' perpetual anxieties on the frontline. Therefore, the days they spent at home were used to make up for the long periods of abstinence or for the sexual promiscuity experienced on the front.³³

Most married soldiers had gone to the front with a certain sentimental "baggage," accumulated during the marriage years, prior to the war. Some were happy couples, others not so much. For those who had a happy marriage, the war contributed to cementing and valuing the relations between them. For example, Sextil Pușcariu confessed in a letter he wrote to his wife during the war: "I have never felt more acutely and more intensely how happy I am to have you and our babies than during this terrible war."³⁴ Many were those who felt the same way. Not so much those for whom marriage had become a burden, weighing heavily upon their shoulders because of the war and inevitably slipping towards dissolution.

Means of Communication/Interaction in the Married Couples in Transylvania during World War I Letters, Postcards, Packages

THE MEANS of communication used by married couples in Transylvania in the years of World War I were letters, postcards, packages and photographs. By far, letters were the most important means of maintaining the contact be-

tween the internal and the external front. They were the unseen thread that ensured the contact between spouses, families, relatives, friends, etc. Today it is widely recognized that the Great War had triggered a genuine “epidemic” of writing (letters, postcards, memoirs, journals, etc.), which contaminated all the belligerent countries. Billions of letters were sent, at that time, to and from the trenches, across the entire world.³⁵ Many have been preserved to this day. Others got lost along the way or were intercepted by censorship, never reaching their recipients. 12,000 letters have been preserved in Cluj-Napoca, retrieved from the city’s hospitals and censorship bureaus of that time.³⁶ Many of them were addressed to the husbands who had left for the front or to the wives who had been left behind and they form an extraordinary documentary source of cultural history.

“Leonora . . . don’t forget to write to me every day!”³⁷ This is what Sextil Pușcariu asked his wife on his departure for the front in August 1914. And she did not forget. For four years, up until the end of the war, the Pușcariu wrote to each other every day and, sometimes, even twice a day. However, Pușcariu’s situation was a fortunate one. Although he was dispatched to the fronts in Serbia and Italy, he was never sent to fight in the first line. He remained behind the front, working for the supply services, which allowed him long respites in which he could write to his wife and continue his literary work. At the end of the war, the letters his wife had received formed the basis of the volume of memoirs he dedicated to the Great War. Things were different in the case of his countryman Mihai Dan, whose correspondence with his wife was much less consistent, given his deployment to the area of the defensive lines and his wife’s low level of literacy.

From the trenches or from behind the frontlines, the soldiers continued to write to their wives or families, with some regularity. Still, for many of the Transylvanian soldiers, just like for the Italians or the French, sending a letter home was more than a simple writing exercise. Having little or no school training, many of them wrote with difficulty and some could not write at all. Some of them learned the basics of writing and reading on the front, so they could send their families back home a few lines and show them they were still alive.³⁸ Thus, writing became synonymous with, above all, staying alive. Here is what a wife wrote to her husband, who was in hospital in Bistrița, after receiving no letter from him for a long time: “I was much aggrieved when the word came out in Frasin that you’re dead. I couldn’t believe that ‘cause I knew you’re in hospital but they said that you’d died from a disease. And when I got a postcard, I thought I’d be jumping for joy, and I beg of you, with all my heart, write to me when you can, ‘cause when a postcard arrives, it’s like you came to me yourself and this gives me such joy. . .”³⁹

Also, for most of these semi-literate soldiers, writing involved a difficult exercise of self-expression. For them, it was a real effort to switch from verbal communication to the contact with a piece of paper that, more often than not, looked like a narrow and limited space, marked by partly unknown glyphs. What increased this difficulty even further was the interaction with an absent interlocutor, through a

letter that did not ensure instantaneous communication, but needed a few days to reach its destination.⁴⁰ That is why many of them could not shift from colloquial words to the more formal rhetoric of written exchanges, but used the same expressions, as if this was a dialogue between two face-to-face interlocutors: “A missive written on August 7 to my much desired wife. And I, your husband Melian, am healthy and I wish thee the same sound health and many good and happy years to you and to my daughter.”⁴¹

Moreover, writing—albeit only letters and postcards—was a way of mentally escaping the trench warfare or the infernal bomb blasts and of retrieving the universe of home, where each and every thing had a particular sentimental value.⁴²

Paper, the physical support on which these letters were written, was often difficult to acquire, especially on the front. Consequently, it was often the case that on the same piece of paper there were crammed not only the husband’s message to his wife, but also her answer, that of the parents, the neighbors, the friends and, last but not least, the persons who wrote on their behalf.⁴³ Interestingly, unlike letters, the standard postcards, known as *Tábori Postai* or *Feldpostkorrespondenzkarte*, were more accessible to the soldiers on the front than paper. This explains their much higher frequency compared to letters drafted on paper. It is true, however, that unlike letters, postcards offered a limited space for epistolary communication. They had the value of “signs of life” coming from those who sent them and did not offer the sender the possibility of detailed communication with the addressee.

For the soldiers who could not read or write, communicating with the wife and the people back home was even more difficult. This involved continuous recourse to their comrades or superiors, which could become embarrassing and humiliating. For instance, among the letters of the Transylvanian Romanian soldiers preserved in Cluj, there is an undated epistle sent by a wife to her husband on the front: “My beloved husband, I would send you letters more often but I’m afraid you won’t be able to read them, I’ve sent you two other letters written down by others, but they don’t feel much like writing if you are not at home. But if you can read them, write to me, ‘cause I won’t be asking anyone else and I’ll write to you myself.”⁴⁴

This proves that illiteracy or semi-literacy was at least as frequently encountered (if not more) on the home front. This is why communication through letters or postcards was sometimes hindered also by self-censorship. Recourse to those who could write, on either side of the front, required time and money. In addition to this, self-censorship often prevented the unfiltered disclosure of the correspondents’ feelings. Last but not least, to all these obstacles was added military censorship, which requisitioned any letter suspected of potentially contributing to lowering the combatants’ morale.⁴⁵ Despite this official censorship and the self-censorship determined by the spouses’ low levels of literacy, letters and postcards remained, for Transylvanian couples, the most widespread and the easiest means of communication during the war.

Next to letters, the packages sent from the home front to the trenches were another means for spouses to stay in touch. Allowed by the authorities within the pre-set limits of a few kilograms and with a monthly frequency, packages provided the soldiers with a sense of proximity to home, the wife, the children and the family. Naturally, most soldiers requested packages that would cater for their everyday subsistence needs. Some demanded articles of clothing that were adequate for that season. Others asked for food, which they lacked or was insufficient in the daily rations they received on the front. For example, the soldier Grigorie Rus wrote to his wife and family on 14 October 1914, asking them to send him a package containing “a scarf for my neck, and gloves and woollies and tobacco and bacon and whatever you want and lots of onions.”⁴⁶ Beyond their concrete and their sentimental value, the contents of the packages also amounted to a barometer of the culinary tastes and traditions specific to the soldiers’ places of origin. Thus, while the Romanians from Transylvania requested pork ham, onions, garlic and tobacco, the Italians demanded cheese, chocolate and other products characteristic of Italian cuisine.⁴⁷

Not least, couple relations also relied, in overcoming long periods of separation, on the photographs soldiers sent from the front to their wives and relatives back home. Images and their visual impact played an important role in staying connected with the loved ones. Mentally, photographs encouraged practices of remembrance and fostered feelings of pride in the communities to which the soldiers belonged. Here is what Aron Bârzovan’s wife wrote to him four months after his departure for the front: “And further, Aron, my dearest, I dearly wish they could send me your picture so I could see you, just enough to quench my longing for you, do send me a picture, kisses galore. . .”⁴⁸ Maria Pop felt the same way when she asked her husband, who was in hospital in Cluj, in November 1914: “Dumitru, my dear, if you should not be able to come or they won’t let you, at least have a picture taken and send it to me, so that I can see you also in those clothes.”⁴⁹ This explains the considerable number of photographs taken during the war, at the request of the soldiers and of their loved ones at home. For many of the soldiers on the battlefield, photographs were to remain the only testimony of their passage through life.

Furlough, Vacations and Visits

The Connections between the Battlefield and the Home Front

LASTING FROM 3 TO 21 days, furloughs or leaves were, just like letters, short but intense moments of reunion for the families or couples separated by the war. At the onset of the hostilities, in August 1914, the military authorities of the belligerent states had suspended any furlough. The idea was that it would be a short war, requiring the presence of all the armed forces on the front.⁵⁰ That is why soldiers

were denied furlough and leave in the Austro-Hungarian Army, too, until the spring of 1915. Hence, for almost half a year, correspondence was the only way of communication between spouses. The prolongation of the war made the combatants' separation from the spouses and the families ever more oppressive and unbearable. There are countless letters sent by the wives and families of the Transylvanian soldiers in the autumn of 1914 requesting them to ask for even a few days' leave. "You should know, Ambrozie, my dear," a soldier's wife wrote in November 1914, "that I can have no rest, day or night, my dear Ambrozie, knowing what great pain you are in . . . and Ambrozie, my dear, as soon as you get this letter, ask them to let you come home for 2–3 days at least, and if they don't, then write to me, 'cause I'll be here waiting for you."⁵¹ Also in November 1914, Maria Pop wrote to her husband, Dumitru Pop, advising him to request "a leave of at least a few days, 'cause I'd really like to see you again as I miss you so much."⁵² In similar terms, another wife wrote to her husband, who was in a hospital in Bistrița in the autumn of 1914: "and do ask them to let you come home for 3 days at least . . . come for the holidays, 'cause it seems to me you've been gone for 10 years, that's how much I long to see you again."⁵³

Due to the numerous requests for military leave, but also for economic reasons and to increase the birthrate, starting from the spring of 1915, the Austro-Hungarian military authorities began to grant the first furloughs and leaves to the mobilized soldiers. For most of these peasant soldiers, agricultural campaigns were an absolute priority, because their family's fate depended on farming the land. The depopulation of villages brought about by the war had placed the burden of looking after the household on the shoulders of the wives and the elderly, who were often unable to manage the farmsteads.⁵⁴ That is why some of the soldiers demanded the intervention of the local authorities with a view to obtaining furlough or leave for the purpose of carrying out agricultural works. This was the case of Pavel Chira, a Transylvanian soldier who, while being stationed on the front, wrote to the village notary on 16 June 1915, urging him to intervene with his military superiors so that he would be granted a leave and go home for the summer agricultural works: "To Mr. Notary Public! Through this letter, I hereby ask you, Mr. Notary, if you would kindly file a request so that I may come home, at least when the time for scything and harvesting comes. Please do this good deed, if you have ever done good in the world, do me a world of good now, too."⁵⁵

Enjoyed and continuously remembered after returning to the front, the holidays spent at home provided a fundamental stimulus for the combatants' morale. Beyond its extraordinary cathartic value,⁵⁶ whereby these individuals regained their freedom confiscated by the war, military leave meant the reunification of the couple. It was the moment when spouses resumed their intimate and social relationships, sharing their feelings and the difficulties they had each experienced. They enjoyed the presence of their children and every moment they spent together. For Sextil Pușcariu, "returning home after four and a half months of separation was a true celebration

and even though time—especially the last days—passed by swiftly, I tasted happiness moment after moment.”⁵⁷ Here is how the long periods of separation brought about by the war and followed by brief re-encounters contributed, in most of the cases, to strengthening relations in the couple and to increasing the spouses’ appreciation of one another.

The visitation rights granted to the wives behind the frontlines also contributed to maintaining the morale of the combatants. Their brief presence, sometimes on several occasions, was another means of supporting the soldiers’ combative ability. In the case of the Transylvanian soldiers, these visits were only possible in areas that were not at a great distance from home. The wives’ limited financial resources and multiple obligations in the household prevented them from visiting their husbands if they were stationed very far away. For example, Maria Pop wrote to her husband Dumitru, who was in hospital, in the autumn of 1914, asking him to request a transfer closer to home, so that she might be able to visit him: “And do ask permission to come closer to here so I may also come to see you, for I’d go there too, but because of the babies I can’t go anywhere, ‘cause they’re sick all the time.”⁵⁸ Household chores also prevented the wife of Teodor, who was in hospital in Cluj, to visit him sooner: “And you wrote to me that I should come see you, but I can’t do that before Pentecost, ‘cause there’s no one I could leave at home, as neither father nor your folk can come, since they’re going to work.”⁵⁹ These visits were highly desired, as demonstrated by the letter Ion Borbel sent his wife Mariška, asking her to come see him: “My much beloved wife, I’ll have you know that I, your husband, Ion Borbel, am still in Poiana Stampei and that I wish you came to me, so that we may see one another and have a few words. And as soon as you get and read the postcard from me, you should come and also bring the wife of my brother, Gavril. . . you should come together and you should go see the notary for visitation rights, so that you may come and see me in Poiana Stampei.”⁶⁰

THIS PRELIMINARY analysis of Transylvanian couples during World War I illustrates the fact that there were numerous similarities between the Romanian realities and the situation in other belligerent states. These similarities are especially visible as regards the behavior of the peasant soldiers from Germany, Italy and France, the conduct of the military recruited in Transylvania resembling it to a great extent. One thing is clear: whatever part of Europe they came from, married couples experienced the trauma of their separation or the thrill of seeing one another and becoming reunited in a more or less similar manner. Especially insofar as the illiterate or semi-literate individuals were concerned, communication in the couple was as difficult and impeded by self-censorship in Transylvania as it was in rural Italy or Germany.

These were just some of the ordeals that married couples went through during World War I. Identifying these trials and tribulations represents only the first step towards acknowledging that the Great War brought a genuine hiatus in the life of

couples.⁶¹ It caused a fracture in the relationship between spouses, for whom time appeared to have stood still for four years.

Not least, the war subjected married couples to a true test of resilience and endurance. Some marriages collapsed, others were mutilated by the war, through the loss of one or both spouses, and yet others survived. In the latter case, the spouses attempted, after the war, to recover the lost time.



Notes

1. Sextil Pușcariu, *Memorii*, ed. Magdalena Vulpe (Bucharest, 1979), 5–7.
2. Mihai Dan, *Istoria ce am petrecut în crâncenul război*, eds. Viorel Ciubotă and Ion M. Botoș (Satu Mare, 2008), 9–12.
3. Martha Hanna, “The couple,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. 3, *Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge, 2014), 6.
4. *Ibid.*; id. *Your Death Would be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Harvard, 2006).
5. Susan Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (London–New York, 2013); id., *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, 1999).
6. Françoise Thébaud, *Écrire l’histoire des femmes et du genre* (Lyon, 2007); id., “Donne e identità di genere,” in *La prima guerra mondiale*, eds. Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Jean-Jacques Beker, Italian ed. Antonio Gibelli, 2 (Turin, 2007), 35–49.
7. Ioan Bolovan, *Primul război mondial și realitățile demografice din Transilvania: Familie, moralitate și raporturi de gen* (Cluj-Napoca, 2015), 75–123; Ioana Elena Ignat Kisanovici, *Participare și mobilizare în Transilvania în primul război mondial* (Cluj-Napoca, 2015), 103–122; Eugenia Bârlea, *Perspectiva lumii rurale asupra primului război mondial* (Cluj-Napoca, 2004), 97–144; Liviu Maior, *Doi ani mai devreme: Ardeleni, bucovineni și basarabeni în război, 1914–1916* (Cluj-Napoca, 2016), 121–155.
8. Hanna, “The couple,” 8.
9. *Ibid.*, 10.
10. Bârlea, 97.
11. See the collection of letters entitled *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, located at the National Archives of Romania, Cluj County Branch (hereafter cited as AN, SJ Cluj); Bogdan Gozman, “Imaginea familiei transilvănene în corespondența ostașilor din Primul Război Mondial,” in *De la lume adunate...*, eds. Crucița-Loredana Baciuc, Anamaria Macovei, and Roxana Dorina Pop (Cluj-Napoca, 2011), 214–216.
12. Bârlea, 97–121; Maior, 128.
13. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, VI, 432, People with surnames starting with the letter M in the counties of Cluj, Szolnok–Doboka and Turda-Arieș, the years 1914–1917, fol. 42.
14. *Ibid.*, 6: 432, People with surnames starting with the letter M in the counties of Szolnok–Doboka and Turda-Arieș, the years 1914–1917, fol. 65.

15. Ibid., Letters addressed to the soldiers. D. Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914, fol. 163.
16. The equivalent of 2.15 hectolitres.
17. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, Soldiers distributed by regiments. 180. Soldiers in the infantry regiment 63, 1914, fol. 26.
18. Ibid., 4, Letters addressed to the soldiers. 235. Soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Turda, 1914, fol. 97.
19. Bârlea, 198.
20. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, Letters addressed to the soldiers. D. Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914, fol. 163.
21. Ibid., 4, D, 228, Censored letters (Cluj), 1914–1915, fol. 296.
22. Manon Pignot, “I bambini,” in *La prima guerra mondiale*, 51.
23. AN, SJ Cluj, colecția *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 4, Letters sent to the soldiers. 235. Soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Turda, 1914, fol. 25r.
24. Ibid., f. 29.
25. Emmanuelle Cronier, “Tra fronte e fronte interno: la questione delle licenze,” in *La prima guerra mondiale*, 83–84.
26. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 4, D. 228, Letters to hospitalized soldiers, the extreme years, 1914–1915, fol. 6.
27. Ibid., 4/234. Letters to hospitalized soldiers in Bistrița, Cluj, Sibiu, Brașov, Budapest, Pécs, 1914–1917, fol. 32.
28. Ibid., Soldiers distributed by regiments. 180. Soldiers in the infantry regiment 63, 1914, fol. 26.
29. Pignot, 51.
30. Sorina Paula Bolovan and Ioan Bolovan, “Populația satului românesc transilvănean în anii Primului Război Mondial: Mobilitate și imobilitate afectivă,” in *Mișcări de populație și aspecte demografice în România în prima jumătate a secolului XX*, eds. Sorina Paula Bolovan, Ioan Bolovan, Rudolf Gräf, and Corneliu Pădurean (Cluj-Napoca, 2007), 81–82.
31. Pușcariu, 97–98.
32. *Marele Război în memoria bănățeană 1914–1919*, vol. 3, eds. Valeriu Leu, Nicolae Bocșan, and Mihaela Bedecan (Cluj-Napoca, 2015), 333.
33. Cronier, 84.
34. Pușcariu, 48.
35. Fabio Caffarena, “Le scritte dei soldati semplici,” in *La prima guerra mondiale*, 646.
36. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*. The letters written in Italian were published by Ștefan Damian in *Lettere dai tempi di guerra* (Cluj-Napoca, 2004), 191.
37. Pușcariu, 30.
38. Maior, 124; Antonio Gibelli, *La grande guerra degli Italiani 1915–1918* (Milan, 1998), 136–141.
39. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 4, Letters addressed to the soldiers, 235. Soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Turda, 1914, fol. 29r.
40. Caffarena, 648.
41. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 472, People with surnames starting with the letter R in the counties of Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Sălaj and Turda-Arieș, 1914–1917, fol. 3r.

42. Gibelli, 140.
43. Aurel Răduțiu, *Romos (jud. Hunedoara): File de cronică 1850–1950* (Deva, 2015), 247–248.
44. AN, SJ Cluj, the Collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 4. D, 228, Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914–1915, f. 6r.
45. Ignat Kisanovici, 148–157.
46. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 472, People with surnames starting with the letter R in the counties of Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Sălaj and Turda-Arieș, 1914–1917, fol. 12r.
47. Damian, 186.
48. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, Soldiers distributed by regiments. 180. Soldiers in the infantry regiment 63, 1914, fol. 26.
49. Ibid., Letters addressed to the soldiers, D. Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914, fol. 163.
50. Cronier, 77–78.
51. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 4/234, Letters to soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Sibiu, Brașov, Budapest, Pécs, 1914–1917, fol. 31.
52. Ibid., Letters addressed to the soldiers, D. Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914, fol. 163.
53. Ibid., 4, Letters addressed to the soldiers. 235. Soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Turda, 1914, fol. 29r.
54. Bârlea, 117–121; Maior, 126–128.
55. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, 6, 432, People with surnames starting with the letter M in the counties of Cluj, Szolnok-Doboka and Turda-Arieș, 1914–1917, fol. 24; Răduțiu, 250.
56. Cronier, 84.
57. Pușcariu, 53.
58. AN, SJ Cluj, the collection *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial*, Letters addressed to the soldiers, D. Letters to hospitalized soldiers, 1914, fol. 163.
59. Ibid., 4, Letters addressed to the soldiers. 235. Soldiers hospitalized in Bistrița, Cluj, Turda, 1914, fol. 97r.
60. Ibid., 6. 311, People with surnames starting with the letter B in the counties of Cluj, Szolnok-Doboka, Hunedoara and Turda-Arieș, 1915–1917, fol. 18r.
61. Antoine Prost, “Lo sconvolgimento della scietà,” in *La prima guerra mondiale*, 553.

Abstract

Being Wife and Husband during World War I: A Transylvanian Cultural Perspective

In Romanian historiography there is little research into the “lived” experience of the individuals and the couples exposed to war. The purpose of this study is to investigate the individual psychological processes underlying the war experience of Romanian families in Transylvania during WWI. In this respect, we propose an innovative approach to WWI within an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Data from the war correspondence and personal memories of Romanian soldiers and families during WWI revealed interesting information regarding the dynamic of mental and

emotional mechanisms of the couples before, during and after the war and also reflects the integration of the general historical context and war experience in a personal narrative destiny. Moreover, the analysis offers important insights for understanding the war consequences regarding marriage in the Transylvanian Romanian society.

Keywords

First World War, Transylvania, Romanian couple, war correspondence, peasant soldiers