

Excerpts from a Theme

Gingerbread Craft in a Multicultural Community

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THIS CASE study is dedicated to one of the most appreciated crafts in the villages of Central and Eastern Europe—the making of gingerbread. The ethnographic documents brought into discussion are parts of an extended research on the oral history of the Romanian historical communities from the province of Vojvodina (Serbia), based on the autobiographical narratives of the local people.¹ The case study presented here relates to a significant Romanian community which lives in the village of Nicolinț (Nikolinc).

The existence of gingerbread craftsmanship in Central and Eastern Europe has been documented since the sixteenth century. According to the documents cited by József Lukács, honey and the products containing honey, such as mead and gingerbread, represented an important export resource for the Principality of Transylvania, in 1695. Important quantities of mead and gingerbread were sold on the Hungarian and Polish markets. At that time, the recipe for gingerbread could be found in all the famous cookbooks of the century:

Gingerbread, mentioned under the name of “donut with honey” or “donut from Turda,” was a product which satisfied the people’s appetite for sweets. It could be exported because it would keep for a long period of time. Gingerbread was made together with other bakery products (bread, pretzels) by women hired in “baking-houses.” Over time, it became the most common present brought home from the fairs. Some pieces of gingerbread were decorated with the coat of arms of the principality; others were cut in the shape of an animal (a little horse, a rooster). Usually, little girls received a gingerbread in the shape of a doll, and little boys—one in the shape of a riding hussar. The heart-shaped gingerbread, beautifully decorated with a piece of mirror in its center, was considered evidence of love and it was given by a man only to his future wife.²

Vojvodina is an autonomous province of Serbia situated in the northern part of this country. After the end of the war between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire, in 1718, Vojvodina became part of a territory administrated directly by the Austrian Crown. The emperor himself was declared “the owner of the whole land and the beneficiary of its incomes.”³ The governors of the province transformed the large

swamplands which covered the region into fertile soil, which brought considerable economic advantages to the Crown's treasury. The peasants of the region became the main resource of the province and colonists from other parts of the empire were encouraged to settle here. Particular attention was given to craftsmen, as they were an important factor in the economic development of the province. However, the manufacturers were not allowed to organize into guilds.⁴

The central and eastern parts of Europe had always been considered a multicultural space, due to the large variety of ethnic groups which had lived here since ancient times or had been brought here by the authorities to colonize and support the political and economic interests of the Crown. Therefore, the fundamental feature of the provinces of the Habsburg Empire, like Vojvodina, was the presence of different types of multiculturalism within the human settlements.

The Romanian communities in Vojvodina had always lived in the villages situated in close proximity to the cities of Vršac, Novi Sad, Pančevo, Zrenjanin, alongside other ethnic communities like the Serbians, the Hungarians, the Germans, the Croats, the Slovaks, the Ruthenians, the Gypsies and others. The Romanians were mostly peasants working the land and animal breeders.

From the diachronic perspective of history, the social emancipation of the region was delayed by the long foreign dominations, which kept the people locked in a medieval system of serfdom in order to ensure a better control over resources. As a result, the capitalist economic relations emerged here only in the first half of the eighteenth century, when the handicrafts, the trades and the industries were consolidated. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the craftsmen organized themselves into corporations, the traders became an essential segment of the economic life and the cities developed as a result of the emergence of a new social category—the middle class.⁵

Nikolinč or Nicolinț, as the Romanians call it, is a village situated 53 kilometers from Vršac, a city of Vojvodina, which became, in the eighteenth century, an important cultural center of the Romanian community.⁶ Nicolinț was first documented in the fifteenth century, but its inhabitants deserted their homes several times, due to the wars between the two empires which claimed the territory and to the insecurity thus created. Once the region was transferred to the Habsburg Monarchy, in 1718, the village was repopulated. The documents of the time mentioned forty Romanian families settled within the borders of the new settlement. In 1744, the village was included in the Banat Military Border—a district of the military province of the Habsburg Monarchy—and it was subject to a special law and a special economic regime. An Orthodox church was built here in 1791, for the Romanians who were the majority ethnic group in the village.

The inhabitants of Nicolinț had always been peasants who worked the land. They cultivated mainly corn and cereals. The traditional crafts in the village were blacksmithing, carpentry, wheel manufacturing, tin smithery, brickmaking, butchery, or baking. Other crafts were added in time, as the technology evolved and new colonists were integrated in the region.⁷ Industrialization, which began in this part of Europe in the nineteenth century, determined radical social changes, when the cities became important cultural and economic centers. In villages like Nicolinț, the communities remained conservative, as the peasants continued to work the land in a rather traditional manner.

Only the radical social and economic changes brought by new political regimes after the Second World War changed the archaic way of life in the rural communities. Depending on the cities, peasants embraced new professions and abandoned the old crafts. Further social transformations were imposed by the technological revolutions of the last decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The ethnological documents recorded in the village of Nicolinț in the last two decades reveal these radical changes from a “grassroots” perspective. The life stories narrated by the people, which are the main resource for the present study, capture the last images of the crafts which disappeared from the economic structure of the village. Together with the crafts and the people who practiced them, the system of social relations in which they function also vanished.

Lebcelderi, lecederi, licideri or licidari

ZRENJANIN OR Becicherecul Mare, as the Romanians call it, became one of the most important craftsmen’s centers of the province, in the first half of the nineteenth century, when it belonged to Torontál County. Of all crafts, the making of gingerbread had been always considered unique and its secrets had been carefully treasured. Even nowadays, the recipes of the flavored and garnished pieces of sweetbread are not disclosed.

In the old times, a gingerbread manufacturer was called *lebcelder*—from the German word *Lebzelter*. Over time, his names took various forms: *leceder*, *licider* or *licidar*. In the beginning, the main products a *lebcelder* would sell were sweets based on honey. Later on, the offer diversified, with the inclusion of candies and gingerbread.

In the Romanian villages of Vojvodina, the artisan who practiced this craft was called *turtar* and he limited his products to gingerbread and candies, as the rest of the sweets were the privilege of the *bombonțar* or the *țucârpecher*, who made candies (*bomboanță*), nut bars, caramelized sugar, red candy apples and other products especially loved by children.

A Local Story: Milan the Old Gingerbread Master

MILAN, THE old gingerbread master, has a life story which reveals the necessary elements allowing us to restore the practice of a craft and the impact it had on the social life of a rural community like Nicolinț. Milan is known as the *turtariu din Nicolinț* and his exquisite gingerbread products are still remembered by the people, who associate them with the joy they brought to their childhood. Our interlocutors describe the different shapes and sizes of the gingerbreads and also their purposes. The most frequently mentioned products are those decorated with a little piece of mirror in the center, which was a mandatory presence on the Christmas tree.

Milan Trifon's family was the only one in the village of Nicolinț who knew the secret of gingerbread making. His products were sold not only locally but also in the surrounding areas. Year after year, driving his chariot packed with gingerbread, Milan Trifon became the famous Milan the *turtariu*, a picturesque presence in the fairs of Vojvodina. Even the local newspaper *Satul 899* dedicated an article to him:

*Besides little horses, little guns, little girls and little hearts, he strung on threads beads of gingerbread, colored in white and pink, with crosses in the middle. Then he made the ciuture, a bag with small glove-like handles, decorated with crepe paper and mirrors, which we hung in the Christmas tree.*⁸

Doru Trifon, Milan's descendant, evoked his portrait through his grandmother's memories:

I know the story from my grandmother, Macra, the last of our family who kept in her soul a lot of memories from the past. My great-grandfather was a native of Alibunar and he came in Anghelina's house as a son-in-law, bringing with him the most precious treasure anybody could have – a golden craft which brought them prosperity. Milan mastered the art of baking, which was highly appreciated in those days. In time, he built a workshop and a shop in his family's house. It was the first shop opened in our village. Beside gingerbread, consumer goods and candies were sold here.

Milan is remembered not only as a gingerbread master, but as a person with multiple skills. He had his own smithy and he was an appreciated mason. Many houses in Nicolinț were built by him. The fact that the facade of his own house was built from the same type of bricks as the walls of the church validates the respectable status he had in the community and adds another positive element to his rather mysterious portrait.

We found from grandmother Macra's story that Milan did not want to reveal the secret of gingerbread to anybody. That is why the family business failed after his death. His nephew regretfully declared that the family "had broken up" the old man's oven a few years ago. Some molds for gingerbread and for candies were kept as material memories, but nobody in the family knows how to use them properly. The professions which Milan's successors had been encouraged to practice had no connection with his craft. The gingerbread manufacturer dreamt of a superior social status for his sons:

There is an interesting thing about my great-grandfather. He insisted that his children went to school. This was a very important and also rare thing in his time. My grandfather, Corneli, started to study at the college in Vrșac. But he had never finished it. His brother, Andrei Lipa, graduated from the Theological Seminar. He was a priest for a short period of time, then he dedicated his entire life to journalism.

In most cases, we recorded short stories which help us imagine what a piece of gingerbread looked like in those days. Very few details of its manufacturing process can be restored from these narratives. The fact that our informants were children when the

memory of this rare craft was produced may be the explanation. All we know nowadays is that gingerbread contained honey, flour, sugar, and eggs, and the dough was rolled on a long table. Different shapes were cut, with the help of metal molds. The gingerbread pieces were baked in a special brick oven. The oven had two doors—one in the front and the other in the back. The front door had two small windows which allowed the baker to check the process without opening the oven.

When questioned about the craft, our informants tended to remember different contexts in which they integrated a gingerbread manufacturer, usually selling his products, or a person which offered them gingerbread as a gift. Nevertheless, these contexts function as parts of a puzzle which can offer an image of the structure of everyday life in Nicolinț. As Otilia Hedeșan pointed out in her book dedicated to one of the prodigious storytellers of the Romanian community in Vojvodina, describing “the apparently insignificant behavior, types of food, everyday labor, rules and priorities which discretely and in the same time firmly regulated the life of the village,”³ the narrative of the people evokes important aspects which help us restore the way a community like Nicolinț functioned.

Bombonțari

ONE CANNOT speak about gingerbread without mentioning the *boboanță* and the *bombonțar*, which function as the antagonist in the narratives about the sale of sweets. Gheorghe Cenușă, born in 1926, remembered that there had been other families who made sweets long ago in Nicolinț, but none of them were making gingerbread: “There was a man—I have forgotten his name. . . . He and his old lady had no children. He made candies, all sorts and shapes, and he sold them. He went out in front of the church to sell them.” The informant forgot the name of the person who made the sweets, but he remembered the context in which the sweets were displayed: a counter in front of the church or at the corner of the street, where the grandparents who returned home from the Sunday service could stop and buy them for the joy of their grandchildren waiting home. The sweets were also sold on Sundays and on holidays in the places where people gathered to dance. The children were enthusiastic to buy as many as possible to satisfy their craving for sugar all week long, until the next occasion. These simple gestures, which ensured the harmony of the family and, eventually, of the community, were integrated in the ritual of a holy day. The sweets acquired a specific function in the system of family relations, strengthening the connection between the oldest members and the youngest ones.

Another memorable figure of Nicolinț was the famous Boaba. She learnt the craft of candy making from her father, who had come as a son-in-law in the village, just like Milan. When he died, his daughter Boaba and his widow continued to produce and sell candies, red candy apples, and even ice cream. People remembered a time when they had a kiosk in the center of the village. Their business closed when an Albanian family from Kosovo arrived in Nicolinț, in the 1970s. They opened a sweet shop “in the true sense of the word,” where they sold candies, cookies and most of all baklava and ice cream.

Almost every village in Vojvodina had a story about confectioners arriving from Kosovo. Nowadays, the most popular confectioners in the region are in Straja (Straža) and in Uzdin, and they mostly make ice cream.

In present times the craftsmen are reinventing themselves. The case of the Ideja candy store in Kikinda is relevant. The family who owns the production facility and the shop has kept the knowledge of their craft for two hundred years. Dinca Has, the current owner, and her two daughters sell sweets adapted to the new expectations of the buyers. Using modern technology, they bake gingerbread and decorate it with pictures inspired by the new elements of the children's imaginary.

Just as the *turtar* of the olden days adapted their products to their customers' needs, today's confectioners adapt to theirs. Tradition has always been adapted to market demands, but currently the local crafts are dealing with a supermarket. The craftsmen try to find a social status in their communities which are presently locally and globally connected. However, gingerbread has preserved its function—it strengthens the connection between the members of the family or the members of the community. Today gingerbread displays new shapes and new ornaments and it is integrated in holidays which are also new for the villages in Vojvodina—like Saint Valentine. Its versatile form allows the manufacturer to transform it into an advertisement or a tourist souvenir. In both cases the “local,” “traditional,” and “authentic” connotations are preserved.

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Notes

1. Eufrozina Greoneanț, *Tradiție și memorie familială: Studiu de caz—localitatea Nicolinț din Banatul sârbesc* (Pančevo: Libertatea, 2014).
2. *Cărticica meseriei de bucătar: Cartea de bucate tipărită la Cluj în 1695*, translation, introduction and notes by József Lukács (Bucharest: GastroArt, 2019), 81.
3. Gligor Popi, *Românii din Banatul sârbesc în secolele XVIII–XX: Pagini de istorie și cultură* (Pančevo: Libertatea; Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1993), 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 29.
5. *Ibid.*, 72–75.
6. Mircea Măran, *Localități bănățene: Trecut istoric și cultural* (Pančevo: Libertatea, Timișoara: Augusta, 2003), 115–117.
7. Greoneanț, 155–175.
8. Silvia Truia, “Țăglana,” *Satul 899* (Nikolinc) 7 (1996): 3.
9. Otilia Hedeșan, *Luai Uzdinu de-amăruntul: Amintirile unei povestitoare prodigioase: Mărioara Sârbu* (Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2015), 13.

Abstract**Excerpts from a Theme: Gingerbread Craft in a Multicultural Community**

The article is based on a case study dedicated to the making of gingerbread—one of the most appreciated crafts in the villages of Central and Eastern Europe. The ethnographic documents brought into discussion are parts of an extended research on the oral history of the Romanian historical communities from the province of Vojvodina (Serbia), as it emerges from the autobiographical narratives of the local people. The selection of the interviews recorded in Nikolinc (Nicolinț), one of the most representative Romanian village in the cultural area taken into consideration, allows the researchers to have a grassroots perspective on the functions given to food in the social practices of the community and to highlight the strategies of adaptation to the economic context experienced in time by the practitioners of a traditional craft.

Keywords

gingerbread, traditional craftsmanship, Banat, Vojvodina, Romanian historical community, multiculturalism