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**Tattoos and Ankle Bracelets: Recalling Fieldwork in Romania**

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In the fall of 1973, having completed my first semester of graduate school at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, I was invited by Professor John W. Cole to join a research group of graduate students who would conduct ethnographic research in Romania. At the time, UMASS was one of the few American anthropology programs focusing on Europe, an area with little attention or status within socio-cultural anthropology. UMASS had an ongoing European Field Study Program, where a professor and grad students could conduct pre-dissertation field research in Europe. My own interest was in socialist Eastern Europe, especially Yugoslavia, which at the time was relatively open to anthropologists. However, the chance to go to Romania on fieldwork, together with John and five other UMASS grad students for a pre-dissertation semester (with a 1500 dollar stipend) was a fantastic opportunity. John had studied under Eric Wolf at Michigan. John’s research had been in the Italian Alps/South Tyrol on issues of ecology, ethnicity, household inheritance and capitalist modernization (see Cole and Wolf 1974). Eric Wolf, a generation earlier, had participated in Julian Steward’s ‘Peoples of Puerto Rico’ project. John was inspired by the Puerto Rico project, and he envisioned our research in Romania as a continuation of his own interests in ecology, economy, ethnicity and modernization that he had studied in the South Tyrol. Our Romania project would examine these variables in a setting of socialist modernization.

Some months prior, in the summer of 1973 John, David Kideckel and Sam Beck had carried out a reconnaissance trip to Romania. John, David and Sam met Romanian ethnologists in Bucharest and Cluj, and they traveled around the country. In consultation with Romanian colleagues, they decided that we would all be placed in the Brașov region of southeastern Transylvania, known as Țara Bîrsei/Burzenland. The historical comparative basis between the South Tyrol and Southern Transylvania was striking. The South Tyrol was a multiethnic area where Italians and Germans lived in villages and had migrated to market towns, pursuing both agriculture and wage labor. The South Tyrol had great variations in altitude, making for diverse farming/herding adaptations, differences in inheritance patterns and variations in market access. Until World War I, the South Tyrol had formed the *southwestern* frontier of the Austro-Hungarian empire, after which it was incorporated into the new Italian nation-state. By comparison, southern Transylvania, and especially Țara Bîrsei, had been the *southeastern* tip of the Austro-Hungarian empire until being incorporated into an expanded Romanian state after World War I. Țara Birsei was also multiethnic: Romanians, ethnic Germans (Saxons), Hungarians, and Gypsies (Tsigani/Rromi) all lived there. Both the South Tyrol and Southern Transylvania had highland and lowland settlements with different relations to agricultural production and to markets. Brașov (population 200,000 in the 1970s) was a major industrial and trade center as well providing jobs for commuting peasant-workers. In Romania, variables of class, ethnicity, modernization, and state formation could be investigated and compared with the culture and history of the South Tyrol. Our project became one of studying explicitly socialist modernization in an area that had been all but closed to Western anthropologists, or where the explicitly socialist component was not at the center of their research.[[1]](#endnote-1) So in early 1974, John and his family, and five grad students ended up settling in five villages for six months, until August 1974. A year later, all five students returned to research our dissertations, thanks to Fulbright and IREX grants. I settled in Feldioara, a large village 22 km north of Brașov.

With this project began my interest in Romania, which now, 45 years later, has remained. In the remainder of this article I will focus on the context around and my initial field experiences in Feldioara (Marienburg/Földvár) (pronounced fel-dee-WAH-ra).

**That first project**

Every scholar I know – and not just anthropologists, -- is marked by their first major research project. This mark is much like a tattoo, in that it goes deep into our skin, marks our identity, generally lasts a lifetime in terms of emotions and memory, and like a tattoo, can be removed only with much pain. This research tattoo has a special significance for those of us who are anthropologists. Unlike other scientists, our research topic is not tied to a statistical data or questionnaire, nor to a laboratory, nor to a set of one-off interviews. We do our fieldwork in strange places or in closed milieus where we normally have not lived or entered. We settle in and try to live or act like the people we are studying, either in a village, or an organization or some kind of social milieu. Most important, is that as ethnographers, our primary research instrument is our very selves. This makes our research a 24/7 endeavour. It is more intense, but at the same more mundane, since we are ‘out there’ day and night, even if we are using the evening hours for ourselves, writing up notes, etc. Field research, and especially field research for the dissertation, is a rite of passage par excellence. We have the first culture shocks, intense relationships with certain informants, unfamiliar confrontations with bureaucratic authorities who may be much older than us, confrontations with elites who think they know our topic better than we do, and we often live in a strange dwelling with a family who may treat us like a child, a financial resource or even a spy. We have the trials and tribulations of gathering data, analyzing our material, and figuring out our focus. Back at university, we are dealing with thesis advisors, the writing up process, the predictable delays and writer’s blocks, and ‘getting finished’ – forget about getting finished on time. The pressures of dissertation fieldwork and writing up are of a unique kind. For most of us, it is the first time that we will write something really long, hundreds of pages, and the first, and perhaps only time that it will be closely assessed by a group of professors at our own institution whom we know (as opposed to the blind referee). The dissertation research process is a truly surreal experience, both intellectually and emotionally. I think it is so intense that it ends up being a tattoo that stays with you for life.

These pressures were also present for me in Romania, where my wife and I spent a total of 18 months (6 months in 1974, 12 in 1975-76), mostly in the village of Feldioara. Since the first fieldwork, I returned to Feldioara several times for short periods. After completing my dissertation, I did further research on local village elites at the Romanian Communist Party Training School, Academia Stefan Gheorghiu, where I also visited several other villages for short field stays to watch local leaders at work. Between 1985 and 1989 I was blacklisted from entering Romania. After 1989, I returned to Romania on various consulting tasks, working inside Romanian government institutions as part of their EU accession process.

This article is based on three sets of recollections: mindnotes, field notes and the written reports of another institution who was intensely interested in my work: the Romanian secret police (Securitatea). The mindnotes are the selected memories that float in your head, the images, smells, conversations and sensations that an anthropologist has when they have lived among a group of people intimately for a long time. To jog these mindnotes are my own field notes from Feldioara. These notes were written in the pre-computer era, entered in notebooks and typed on Unisort analysis cards. Unisort cards are large 5 x 7 inch cards with holes and small numbers written around all four edges, from 1 through 80. After typing your notes on the cards (I used my Hermes Baby portable typewriter), you punch out the holes in the numbered areas, where each number could denote relevant categories (e.g., kinship, inheritance, history, the collective farm, etc.). The Unisort cards are still in the basement of my home. They remain unscanned.

Besides mindnotes and field notes, the other set of archives about my work are the 600 pages of secret police reports about me and my activities gathered by the Romanian security services, Securitatea. This archive ends abruptly in July 1985, when my family and I were detained on entry at the Bucharest airport and expelled as persona non grata. The reason for my expulsion, I learned, was that I was considered to be conducting hostile activities against Romania; these activities apparently included published and unpublished papers that I had written about Romania and presentations at international conferences. The papers covered topics such as Romania’s underground economy, bureaucracy and corruption, Romanians’ emigration, analysis of rumors, even a paper about the Securitatea itself (Sampson 1982-1989). I had also written journalistic articles, some of which were translated into Romanian and broadcast on the Romanian services of the BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. My Securitatea dossier includes reports from local people in the village, from friends and from Romanian academics in Bucharest and from those whom I met at conferences abroad, or who even stayed as guests in my home (first in Amherst, Massachusetts and later in Copenhagen, where I now live). It also includes assessments by Securitate officers and Romanian embassy personnel abroad, where they speculate who I am, whom I have met, and my what I was doing.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Millions of Romanians had these kinds of files, and so did all foreign researchers. Reading the reports by Securitatea officers or informants (all written by or referred to as pseudonyms), I find some that are quite accurate, others naïve and still others mean-spirited. Nevertheless, they help shape the kind of recollections and memories that I have about my initial field research.

Despite not being able to return to Romania, I followed events in the country. I participated in conferences on Romanian developments, and in Denmark we organized a Romania hearing. Through the 1980s, I was occupied with the issue of whether the regime would collapse. I wrote articles with titles like ‘Is Romania the next Poland’ (1983a), ‘Muddling through in Romania’ (1984a) and ‘Romania: House of Cards’ (1989), and an unpublished paper on the anthropology of the security apparatus itself. In 1990, following the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime, I was able to return to Romania, where I covered the elections for a Danish newspaper. By chance, one of my wife’s work colleagues was organizing ‘democracy visits’ to Denmark. I arranged for him to visit Feldioara and a group of teachers from the village visited Denmark in 1991. Suddenly, my informants were in our kitchen sitting and talking.

In 1992, I was invited to join a Danish consulting firm to help re-organize the Romanian Ministry of Environment in preparation for EU accession. This led to other work in the Romanian central government, on issues of administrative reform, civil society, social impact of mine closures, public communication and NGO legal framework. This Romania consulting work led to jobs in other countries in Southeast Europe, especially dealing with civil society organizations, project assessment, human rights and democracy export. Between 1992 and 2013 I commuted between my academic employment in Copenhagen and Lund and consulting jobs in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Romania. I began to understand the ins and out of what I called ‘The Social Life of Projects’ (1996) and the mechanics of exporting of Western models to the post-communist east. I learned how to write feasibility studies, consulting reports and executive summaries in the particular jargon of project management. I negotiated with government officials and Soros Foundation directors, and I learned to deliver ‘outputs’ within days, even hours. In many cases, the project work – for Scandinavian NGOs, consultancy firms or local government organs – gave me further insight into the workings of bureaucracy and project life generally.

**The formal and the informal**

In this commuting between academic research, university teaching and consulting projects, my fundamental interests have been in the workings of bureaucracy, informal systems and corruption. After years in Romania, both pre- and post-1989, I wanted to learn how organizations work and how they do not work. The workings of organizations – efficiency in some cases, muddling through in others, the distortion of goals and the corruption of means – became a kind of an obsession of mine.

My interest in organization, bureaucracy and ‘getting things done’ is a direct result of my research and field experiences in Romania: watching the local leaders operate in the village, interacting with the Romanian bureaucracy, and in the year after my dissertation, observing training at the local party schools. The initial research has thus left its indelible tattoo. The tattoo is my obsession with the bureaucratic and the informal. The fieldwork left its mark in other ways, of course: I still swear in Romanian, perhaps because these were some of the first words I learned; and if a restaurant is serving *mamaliga* or *cascaval pane*, I will order these on reflex.

My initial Romanian research thus ignited a kind of flame that burns inside me. The standard name for this kind of professional project is ‘research interest’. For me it is a tattoo. But the tattoo of that first fieldwork is also a limitation. Sometimes it acts as an electronic ankle bracelet. Like a criminal under house arrest, if I stray from his immediate surroundings, the alarm rings. The alarm forces you back to your starting point. For me, that first fieldwork had this electronic ankle alarm character. The fieldwork created the tattoo which is the research interest. But sometimes it is also an ankle bracelet. I am a prisoner for life.

**Being special in Romania**

I did not have these interests in bureaucracy, informality and corruption when I began graduate school. On departing for Romania, I had originally intended to conduct sociolinguistic fieldwork. The village of Feldioara had a multiethnic, multilingual population where I could investigate language use and language choice in particular settings. But as usually happens to anthropologists, immersion into the specific field situation changes one’s perspective. The people among whom you have settled end up being preoccupied with different kinds of issues. The main issue was access to resources in an austere, bureaucratic, authoritarian regime. Romanians in villages and towns had to live their lives coping with interminable shortage of basic necessities, the political mobilization of the Ceausescu regime, and a bureaucracy that was at once demanding, arbitrary, repressive and inefficient. It was a system that required people to spend their time and energy trying to figure out how to cope, how to influence an official confronted with vague or contradictory regulations, and how to find a means around restrictions. The Romanian word for this is *descurca*, meaning ‘maneuver’. For example, villagers had official plans requiring them to sell their farm produce to the state at command economy prices. Technically, they could not slaughter their own pig for a wedding or sell it privately. This led to strategies of false reporting of animals, or paying off a veterinarian to report that one’s pig was sick and could be slaughtered. On other occasions, bureaucratic regulations could be disobeyed or ignored. A local official explained to me that there are some regulations he carried out, and others he just put into the desk drawer. On other occasions, the system was downright brutal, with sudden campaigns putting Romanians off balance. Romanians thus had to maneuver their way through the system. They had to use networks, subterfuge and bribes to obtain even basic necessities such as meat, fuel or medicine; they had to pay off the local veterinarian to be allowed to slaughter their own pig; they had to know someone to get powdered milk for their baby, to get their children into university or to obtain an urban residence permit. As a researcher, I had to confront the Romanian bureaucracy to obtain documents, enter certain meetings and ensure my research access.

In this system, we American anthropologists were at the mercy of the Romanian bureaucratic system. We were not simple foreign tourists. We were Romanian-speaking researchers roaming around, unaccompanied by an official escort, living outside Bucharest, among the villagers. We were foreigners in a country where it was in fact illegal for a Romanian to even speak to a foreigner without authorization. As foreigners and as foreign researchers, we were subject to intense surveillance: letters to my professors at UMASS, and to my wife in Denmark about paying the electric bill, were precisely translated. My room at the party school was periodically searched, where it was noted that I had a copy of *The Gulag Archipelago*. In the village, a rumor spread that I had left dollars and a golden pistol behind. As foreigners, however, we also enjoyed certain benefits. We could spend our dollars in the notorious ‘dollar shops’ and buy luxuries for ourselves, or gifts for others (cigarettes, liquor, Swiss chocolate, electronics, etc.). Packs of Kent cigarettes were the major bribe currency in Romania, and were especially useful for obtaining minor services or discounts in hotels, trains, or for car repair. As foreigners, we had these small perks. Most importantly, however, we could do what no Romanian could do: pack up and leave for the West without applying for an exit visa. We were free-wheeling, unwilling representatives of the West, roaming around in a nasty communist dictatorship run by a cynical party apparatus and a brutal secret police. We were never physically harassed. Our informants, friends and acquaintances, however, were monitored, interrogated, pressured and blackmailed to write reports about us. Looking back, I can only wonder how naive we really were.

**Initial fieldwork in Feldioara**

Prior to entering Romania, John had cultivated a few important personal connections. The American sociologist Daniel Chirot had been to Romania doing historical sociology a couple years earlier. He visited Amherst and told of his experiences. And on the 1973 reconnaissance trip, John met the Romanian ethnologist Romulus Vulcanescu and folklorist Mihai Pop, as well as sociologists Henri Stahl and Mihail Cernea. In the Fall of 1973, John had settled on how we could organize our UMASS group project. Two of us, Steven Randall and Sam Beck, would be placed in Paltin and Poiana Mărului, two villages high in the mountains. These were herding villages where there were no collective farms. John and his family and David Kideckel settled in the villages of Mîndra and Hirșeni, respectively, where there were collective farm households but also industrial work in nearby Făgăraș. Finally, my colleague Marilyn McArthur and I were placed in the large (pop. 3000) multiethnic village of Feldioara, which had some local industry and commerce and where many residents commuted by train to the industrial town of Brașov, 22 km away. John knew of my interest in linguistics and with his interest in ethnicity, we saw Feldioara as a great choice of field site. The village had a majority Romanian population, but also Saxon German, Hungarian and Romi/Gypsies. Walk down the main street of the village, and four languages were being spoken. My colleague Marilyn, a fluent German speaker, would focus exclusively on the Saxon community, most of whom lived in the village center. I ended up living with a Romanian family, literally down the hill, and started out by investigating peasant life, household structure, the collective farm and daily life.

In my Cultural Ecology course with Robert Netting at the University of Pennsylvania, I recall him saying, ‘If you don’t know what to do, take a census’. Which is what I did during my first months in Feldioara. I also tried to collect data on language use, which in this case meant switching languages in various public forums. However, the language switching was generally confined to the Saxon Germans, who were also fluent Romanian speakers, and to some of the local Magyars, who could speak both Hungarian and Romanian. It was late January. We had spent only two weeks in Bucharest getting organized, and we were out in the villages, in the snow and mud. By comparison with the bureaucratic experiences of other anthropologists, in other parts of the world, this was an incredibly rapid entry into the field setting. The Romanian bureaucracy either did not know what we were doing, or they were kindly allowing us to do what we want in the hope of using us later. Or both.

**The political/organizational context**

American anthropologists in the 1970s, like all foreign researchers, needed special permissions to enter Romania and do fieldwork. Through the US exchange programs IREX and later Fulbright, we received official designation as visiting foreign researchers. For each of the dozen or so Americans who came to Romania each year – usually to study literature, history, or folklore – one Romanian could go to the United States, usually to study engineering, hard science, or industrial topics. We were part of this diplomatic game, and we knew it. Our presence in Romania was thus approved at the highest levels, and as the Securitate records show, our activities were closely monitored. We needed to be careful about what we did and who we met, and especially what we said to whom; obviously, any sort of political discussions were unwise not only for us, but especially to any Romanians with whom we talked, including those who were uninhibited in criticizing the regime. The close monitoring was also carried out by the U.S. embassy, where we were invited for informal gatherings, and more intimate meetings where we could discuss our work. Embassy staff, including the U.S. ambassador, visited me in the village. I will not speculate on who among embassy staff was working for The Agency. Being far from the centers of political intrigue in Bucharest and in the Central Committee, we could tell the embassy people how ordinary Romanians were getting along. For the Romanian authorities, however, knowledge of ordinary life, knowledge of how Romanians coped with everyday tribulations, the vaunted ‘local knowledge’, this was the equivalent of espionage. For an American to find out how Romanians really lived, and to reveal it to others abroad, was subversive stuff.

**Arrival and set up**

After two weeks in Bucharest, on a cold, day in February 1974, my wife and I, together with Marilyn, arrived in Feldioara. We parked my car in front the local town hall and walked into the mayor’s office. In a few minutes, the mayor had managed to find a letter in his desk that had been circulated some weeks before, announcing our arrival. Standing in the office was a local village man, about 40 and dressed in farm clothes. He was apparently getting some papers signed and stamped by the mayor. As we discussed accommodation with the mayor in my halting Romanian, the man offered to accommodate my wife and I in his home. We accepted and settled into the guest room in a modest three-room house down the hill from the center of the village. Horia worked on the collective farm as a tractor driver, and like most villagers, kept a few cattle, pigs and chickens at home. Horia’s wife Geta commuted to Brașov to work in Factory No. 2 (they made screws). Also living with us was Geta’s mother, who was retired and kept house. My wife and I stayed in the ‘fine room’ of the small house while Horia, Geta and the mother-in-law all slept in the kitchen. We negotiated a rental payment from my stipend, and we took meals by ourselves, purchasing bread, salami, cheese and jam in the local grocery shop or in Brașov. After some weeks, however, the accommodations being a bit too intimate, and without a bathroom, we looked for somewhere else to live. Attending a wedding celebration, a young gymnasium pupil mentioned that his aunt and uncle had a nice modern house. We ended up moving into this more modern house, with better access to kitchen and bathroom facilities. Here we remained through the summer of 1974 and again for a year from August 1975 to August 1976. Zinca and Enache were an older couple, and they cared for their two grandchildren while their mother lived in Brasov. A derivative advantage was that Zinca’s brother was head of the collective farm. Moreover, the local physician, well-connected among the village elite, was the godmother of Zinca’s grandchild, and a frequent visitor in her home.

My main introduction to the village population came through being invited to some weddings, most of which lasted two days. This public exposure of ‘the American guy with the beard’, and his blond wife, led to several invitations to families’ homes. During the first few months in Feldioara, I concentrated on a general survey of local life. This meant interviewing and hanging around with three generations of people: the elderly who could talk endlessly about household structure, agriculture and the years before collectivization; the ordinary workers and their families, some of whom worked on the collective or state farm but most of whom worked in the factories of Brașov; and the younger people in their twenties who also worked but hung out in the local cafe or had parties in their homes or wedding celebrations. Being a large village, Feldioara had a school and even a gymnasium. I became friendly with several of the teachers and was able to extend my networks and discuss more general research concerns with them. Finally, I was fortunate to have nearly daily encounters with my UMASS colleague Marilyn, who dwelled in a large house in the center of the village, where the remaining Saxon Germans still dominated. We could meet at her house or in the local café and discuss the latest developments and gossip, as well as planning to see archives in Brașov or the weekly trip to town for a meal, and meetings with my other UMASS colleagues.

**Being an *etnograf***

For an American walking around the village with blue jeans and an Icelandic sweater, accompanied by a blond Danish wife, driving a German-made car with foreign plates, there was no way that I could be anonymous. The issue, however, was one of impression management: trying to convince the villagers why exactly I was there. Most Romanians knew what an *etnograf* was. An *etnograf* was someone who studied folklore and folk traditions. But Feldioara was a worker village. It had few of the picturesque traditions or rituals found in the more traditional regions of Romania such as Maramures. The Romanians in Feldioara worked in factories, went to the local bar, tended their gardens, or sat home on Saturday nights watching programs like ‘Dallas’ or ‘Colombo’. In the meantime, I had to convince local officials that I was a researcher and not some kind of snoop. Why, asked the mayor, did I as an *etnograf* want to see the village household registers (Registru Agricol)? Why would an *etnograf* want to attend the local People’s Council Meeting, or meetings of the collective farm, much less the local communist party organization (which brought together most of the local elites). In the end, however, largely because I hung around for months, I was able to attend nearly all these meetings except those of the local party committee. My connections with most of the professionals in the village (Rom. *intelectuali*) tended to keep me abreast of developments. I became close friends with some of the schoolteachers, and I played chess with the local dentist. I took lunchtime meals at the canteen of the local boarding school or collective farm, where I met visiting officials. Eventually, I settled into the role of being a *sociolog*, a term with which most Romanians were either vaguely familiar or which seemed to be harmless.

Since anthropologists often want to see documents, and since documents were always suspect in Romania, much of my time was spent negotiating and waiting for responses to my requests. Marilyn and I managed to obtain access very old church records in Brașov, showing family and household structures from centuries earlier. It was exciting to see the same family names pop up in a church records from the 1700s. We also managed to copy village household records from the 1950s and 1960s, when households and their land holdings were expropriated and collectivized. In Feldioara, this process was even more drastic, as the Saxon Germans after World War II had been sent to labor camps in the USSR, only to return some years later to find that their land, animals and even homes had been taken over by Romanians, some local, other immigrants or refugees from other areas. Soon after that, the ‘class struggle’ period began. With collectivization of agriculture, the Saxons and Romanians all lost what remaining lands and animals they owned, except for small private plots and gardens.

**Research themes: migrants and urbanization**

As I hung out in the village, two predominant themes arose which marked my research: the migration into the village from other parts of Romania and its planned urbanization. Feldioara had plenty of industrial workplaces. Down the road was a brick factory. Just west was a uranium processing plant, called ‘Factory R’, which was in fact quasi-secret. Also nearby was a large pig-raising complex with 30,000 pigs. Feldioara had a state farm and machine tractor station, all of which employed skilled workers. Finally, several hundred Feldioarans and new migrants commuted to Brașov’s factories, while Brașov professionals commuted to the school, the gymnasium, the state farm, and the medical clinic. The village was integrated into a larger industrial economy. It was a village of wage workers and functionaries, with a residual workforce of older women working on the collective farm. The local workers lived in houses and had gardens and plots on the collective farm. The immigrants lived more modestly, often in rented accommodations or prefab apartment blocks.

For the foregoing two decades before my arrival, Feldioara had endured an in-migration of people from more underdeveloped areas of northern and eastern Romania, primarily Moldavia. These people settled in Feldioara to work in local industry or in the factories of Brașov. Obtaining a residence permit for Brașov was difficult, so the Moldavian workers often settled Feldioara and then commuted to Brașov by train. Young Moldavian men and women brought their families, or married each other, or they married local Feldioarans. Some of these migrants were also teachers, functionaries or party officials who had found work in the village instead of more unattractive rural outlying areas. During my time in Feldioara, the mayor (who was also head of the local party committee) was himself a Moldavian, and the chief village clerk a Magyar from Brașov. The mayor who succeeded him was also an inmigrant from Brașov.

The major social schism in Feldioara was not so much an ethnic division between the local Romanians and Saxons. It was between locals and the new arrivals (*localnici si venetici*). And despite having been in the village for decades, these Moldavian immigrants were still considered new arrivals, or even interlopers. This contrast would form a major theme of my Ph.D. thesis (published in revised form in 1984, Sampson 1984b).

The second theme which came to mark my research, and which would form the core of my thesis, was the planned conversion of Feldioara into a small town. As part of a major plan to restructure the Romanian rural landscape, Romania’s 13,000 villages would be reduced and consolidated. Three thousand small hamlets would be eliminated and their residents moved to larger settlements with infrastructure and services. Three hundred villages had been selected to be developed into small urban centers of approximately 5000 residents. One of these was Feldioara. This national settlement restructuring plan, called systematization (*sistematizare*) was on the minds of the local leaders and the party committee, who looked forward to receiving new resources and infrastructure. The coming urbanization was discussed at People’s Council meetings and in the party committee gatherings. It was mentioned in the national press and by Ceausescu in his speeches. Implementing systematization was one of the tasks of regional planning officials in the Brașov County administration. The plan to urbanize Feldioara, including the building of two hundred apartment units for incoming workers and extension of industry and services, would commence in 1975. Here was an opportunity, serendipitous as it was, for me to do a different kind of anthropology: an anthropology of socialist planning at the local level. As I ended my first fieldwork in Feldioara in the summer of 1974, the systematization project came to occupy more of my time and thinking. An anthropology of socialist planning! Why not?

Back home at UMASS, in preparation for the dissertation fieldwork the coming year, I settled on making socialist planning and systematization my thesis topic, with Feldioara’s urbanization as my case study. In August 1975, I returned to Feldioara to conduct fieldwork on systematization. My UMASS colleagues returned with me (now with IREX and Fulbright grants) to the same villages where they had been previously, and this included Marilyn McArthur with the Saxon German community, up the hill, in the village center, observing the veritable demise of the Saxon German ethnic group as one family after another emigrated to West Germany, while others returned from Germany on vacation in the village. One might have expected ethnic conflict in this situation, but aside from Romanians’ jealousy about Saxons being able to emigrate to the West, and a history of a German upper farmer class versus Romanians who tended to be poorer or even landless, ethnic relations were rather cordial. On several occasions, Romanians told me how they learned from the Saxons (Feldioara had had an agricultural school decades before). Romanian families sent their children to the German-language school classes, Saxon German tutors, or to the German gymnasium in Brașov to learn German. Both groups were aware of certain kinds of cultural differences (Saxons had formal associations, Romanians had networks; Saxons ate sweet, we eat sour, Saxons had primogeniture, Romanians had partible inheritance), but these differences remained in the background as Feldioara endured the immigration of strangers from elsewhere, living in apartments in the center of the village..

**Me and them versus them and each other**

In a critique of Geertzian anthropology, Frederik Barth wrote that anthropologists should not focus so much on how they relate to the people we study, but on how they relate to each other (1989:22). Barth’s idea was that we should stay in the background and watch the drama of social life unfold. This is what I tried to do in Feldioara, but often my own presence and research needs affected the situation. With a focus on the planning situation, there was no research model to find among other ethnographers, in Eastern Europe or elsewhere. I realized that I needed macro data about planning, regional data about the systematization plan, and local data about how the plan was being implemented. I therefore came to the realization that there was some kinds of data I absolutely needed and other kinds of data that would be just nice to have.

The data that I needed concerned everything about Feldioara’s conversion into a new town. This involved obtaining the actual urban planning documents, conversations with planners in Brașov, and the decisions about what to construct. In socialist Romania in cold war times, all such documents were restricted, or even secret. Moreover, as is common in many urban planning schemes, Feldioara’s plan also involved the expropriation of land and dwellings for the building of apartments and diversion of roads. These kinds of measures involved conflicts, and I tried to identify and perhaps track some of these critical cases. In this sense, I was inspired by Gluckman’s work on the case method. Getting hold of the actual plans was complicated since planning documents are strategic, and besides, Feldioara also had a secret factory. Fortunately, I developed a cordial relationship with the top administrator for Brașov County, Stefan Bucur, who allowed me to hang out in the regional planning office. Here I met the architects, engineers and planners who were to implement the systematization scheme for villages in the county, including the other two villages chosen to become small urban centers. For these experts, there was no problem with a researcher trying to study how they applied their expertise. They enjoyed the attention of an American student watching how they work. In many ways, it was easier working with them than with the suspicious local leaders, who were always looking over their shoulder in the local competition and who were sensitive to signals from the regional party apparatus about the danger of a foreigner in their midst.

And what of the plan? As in so many cases of planned change, and as was typical for Romania, things did not go according to plan. Some systematization plans in Romania were brutally enacted, especially in Bucharest, where thousands of dwellings and even churches were destroyed to make way for Ceausescu’s monumental constructions. But in Brașov county, the systematization plan was delayed several times. In Feldioara, some apartments were indeed built during the period of my fieldwork, but the other promised developments to improve village infrastructure never really took place. Not then. Not ever.

On leaving the village in August 1976, the plan to urbanize Feldioara had yet to be implemented. In the years that followed, I returned each year for short stays, watching the urbanization plan stand still. Some apartments were built. A culture house was completed. In the end, I wrote a thesis on the idea of planning and improvisation, and how the discourse of planning and future development was as important as the actual implementation. I ended up demonstrating what so many development experts and local villagers already know: that nothing goes according to plan. But that people still believe in planning.

**Tatoos and ankle bracelets**

My study of the unfulfilled scheme to urbanize Feldioara left its mark on me. My struggles to obtain access to various documents and to attend meetings began to tattoo itself on my entire approach to how I understood life in Feldioara, how I understood Romanian planning, and eventually how I understood East European ‘real socialism’. Much of my fieldwork time involved observing how Romanians negotiated an economy of shortage and bureaucratic regulations, as well as my own interactions and confrontations with bureaucratic actors, efforts to obtain access to documents or attend a meeting or make a visit. Just as ordinary Romanians used their energies to obtain access to resources that were important for their lives (food, housing, medical treatment, exit visas), I was also preoccupied with struggles to obtain the resources I needed as a researcher. What emerged from my 18 months of initial fieldwork in Romania was an understanding of how Romanians use informal networks to negotiate their world. This kind of approach would inform my work from then on, both in my monograph on planning and improvisation, in my analysis of system rationality and irrationality, and in my articles on bureaucracy and corruption, official and underground economy, communication and rumors, and even on the not-so-secret police. Hence, a couple years after my thesis I edited a collection of articles on the Danish underground economy.

If my fieldwork resulted in some kind of mark that sticks with me all the time, a tattoo that I could not wash off, it is this understanding of ‘the informal’ as a strategy, a tactic, even an ethos. The informal in Romania was known humorously as PCR, the initials of the Romanian Communist Party, but also *pile, cunoștiințe și relații* (a *pile* is a ‘file’, as in filing one’s way out of jail) The three words mean short-cut, acquaintances and connections). The informal as I would write about later (Sampson 1986), was a lubrication mechanism that kept society going, and in this way kept society from exploding. Informalism enabled Romania to muddle through (Sampson 1984a), while other East European countries were exploding (Poland). The lubrication function of the informal, however, coexisted with the debilitating functions of informal practices and networks. The informal relations undermined the formal system, making the planned economy impractical and irrational. The job sector was a source of resources for informal plunder. The real Romania was certainly the bureaucracy, but it was also the informal Romania. Informal, non-institutional structures enabled families to become rich while the collective farms on which they worked remained poor. Finally, informalism was also a regime tactic: the system tolerated sloppiness, petty corruption, pilferage and embezzlement, allowing people to experience some kind of control over their lives, and to momentarily forget the repressive control of the Ceausescu regime.

It was this kind of pervasive informalism that has remained for me as a kind of eclectic ankle chain. The informal remained an orientation that I deployed in researching various topics. And it became an orientation in my daily life. My first fieldwork gave me a Romanian orientation to life, such that no matter what the problem, what the regulation, I could ‘find a solution’, ‘find someone’, ‘get a connection’. Some months after returning from Feldioara to Denmark, for example, I missed a deadline for an application I had posted by just one day. I did what any Romanian would do: I walked into the administrator’s office to complain that the postmark was valid, but that my application had not been delivered. I wanted special treatment in a face-to-face manner. But this was Denmark, not Romania. This was a Danish bureaucrat not a Romanian one. My application was late. There was nothing he could do. ‘You’ll just have to apply next year,’ he said. I was asked to leave the office. No relation was started, no bribe solicited, no special favour offered. End of story.

We anthropologists, perhaps because we do so much face-to-face research, have retained our faith in the power of informal solutions. We sometimes communicated an optimistic message about how socialism could ‘work’ by allowing people to play the system (e.g. Wedel 1986). However, we anthropologists tend to forget that despite all these informal tricks and networks, socialist Eastern Europe was also full of people standing in line, for hours or days, unable to get what they needed. In other words, these societies were also full of people whose informal resources were still inadequate to fulfill even basic needs. This lack of basic resources led to true tragedies in Romania: illegal abortions, the sad state of orphanages and street children, the poverty of those in outlying communities, and medical problems of the elderly. While East Europeans’ informal systems were celebrated as models of ingenuity, the East European revolutions were in fact fueled by those who were tired of waiting in line, those millions who did not have the right connections.

In 1979, while writing up my dissertation, I attended an international sociology congress in Uppsala, Sweden. Here I fell in with a delegation of Romanian sociologists. During those days, I provided some of them with cash, and one of them ended up staying a few days with me in Copenhagen. I helped buy some blue jeans for his son. These connections eventually helped me to enter the Romanian party academy as a researcher. At the academy, they translated my dissertation on Feldioara into Romanian (for internal use only, although I managed to procure a copy). I attended seminars on ‘management science’, which was becoming popular within the party training schools. I visited some local party schools and some villages to interview local leaders about the problem of administering regulations in a village environment. I was often accompanied by a Romanian sociologist colleague, who served as a valued intermediary, an escort, and certainly reported back to the security organs of my activities. Generally, however, I was free to travel and conduct the research for these visits.

For many years, despite Romania’s economic decline and brutal repression, I naively assumed that anything was possible if you could try hard enough and could find the right connection. But alas, like other Romanians, I also ended up running up against a brick wall. On December 15, 1984, a decision was handed down by the Securitatea that I was considered an ‘undesirable person’ and would henceforth be denied entry into the country -- for a period of five years, until 31 December 1989. Some of the sociologists at the party academy had reported that my articles ‘distorted the realities of Romania’. Reports were made about discussions we had had on the Polish workers rebellions taking place at the time. Some of my papers reached the wrong hands, or were found among other American grantees, and the security organs, with reports from Romanian diplomats abroad, drew what they considered to be the appropriate conclusions, that I was conducting activities that were destructive to the country, both inside and outside the country. On July 20, 1985, I was detained on entry at Otopeni airport and sent back to Denmark the next day. Further efforts to obtain a visa by addressing Romanian embassy personnel proved fruitless, and right up until the Spring of 1989 they were sending reports about my activities to Bucharest.

Ceausescu was executed on Christmas Day 1989. I returned to Romania in March 1990, watching the transition unfold. I have revisited Feldioara several times, and worked in various consulting tasks in the new Romanian government. But that is another story. What left its mark, however, was my experience in watching Romanians negotiate a chaotic, improvisational, repressive society in which even the smallest daily tasks were considered a victory over the system. My own fieldwork experiences of obtaining data and access were also small victories over the system.

Our anthropological faith in the power of the informal, what we now call ‘agency’, an agency that triumphs over ‘structure’, has a way of staying with us. For me it is the tattoo. But it is also the ankle bracelet of my initial fieldwork. Living in Denmark, a well-ordered welfare state where there are also moments of chaos and bureaucratic stonewalling, I often find myself thinking much more like a Romanian than an American or a Dane. I look for avenues and channels. I try to arrange the coveted face-to-face appointment. I do not trust the state institutions. I look for workarounds for regulations. I try to figure a way out, or a way through. I have a Romanian suspicion of public authorities. And I have a faith that with the right connections or the right approach, preferably face-to-face, that anything can be done. It is a kind of naivety, I admit. My ‘discovery’ of the relation between planning and improvisation, about a plan that never happened, about the power of the informal, these became the both the tattoo that marked my work and the ankle bracelet that kept me in line. If I try to escape, the alarm will ring.

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1. Besides the UMASS group, there were other anthropologists working in Romania in the early and mid-1970s, among them Katherine Verdery, Gail Kligman, Joel Marrant, Mitchell Ratner, and Claude Karnooh. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For more on the anthropologist as spy, see Katherine Verdery’s recent book (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)