

# INTRODUCTION



Liviu is going to England to my uncle's next week, to see how the situation is there; in America there are my first cousins who have made their fortunes. On my dad's side there are 21 first cousins and lots on my mum's side too, that's why we marry among ourselves, because we are so many, so we are all related.

—Mihai, February 2014

This work presents a long-term ethnography of an extensive network of Romanian *rudari* families, who have immigrated prevalently to Italy since the early 2000s.

I started to learn about the world of this composite minority, and particularly of the families whose lives permeate this text, in 2008. From the situation of an urban squat, back to their villages of origin, passing through the stories of migration and places where they lived *here* (in Italy), *there* (in Romania) and spread around the family network (Britain, Spain, Germany, France, Norway), my ethnography has developed with the ageing, growing up and birth – but also, regrettably, the death – of the people I will be describing. It is interwoven with interests that are more specifically linked with these families' cultural intimacy and history as part of History as a whole, sometimes concentrating more on 'home making', the forms of migration, families' composition and recomposition, and sometimes on coping strategies in the face of the enormous difficulties of living in a rich, exclusive, Western European city, Florence.

In addition, interlinked with the various study phases and in the field, my research has on several occasions had a change in application, which marked the first opportunity for development, linked to my work at the Giovanni Michelucci Foundation. I gradually became acquainted with

almost all the families that I will be describing, as part of a big occupation of a publicly owned building complex that, until 1998, had been open and providing health-related services, situated on a hillside just outside Florence. The first meetings in this former hospital, at the end of 2008, with some Italian people and families coming from Morocco and Romania, a year and a few months after the start of the occupation, aroused a strong interest on my part, as a researcher and as a person, living at that time on the other side of the hill, but in the same municipality, Sesto Fiorentino.

I had been to see the occupation without any justification, stealthily, just to find out about a situation that I had read of in the press and from people in some Florentine social centres and movements, who had put me in contact with the occupant to whom they referred, Camilla. She had begun a process of linking with the territory of which the former Luzzi hospital, as 'bare' ownership, is still a part. When I went to see her, after explaining to her over a coffee, which she offered me in her occupied house, that I was an anthropologist, she told me enthusiastically, 'At last, someone has come!'

After the following March, an opportunity for fieldwork at the Luzzi appeared. The Tuscan regional government had asked the Michelucci Foundation to look into the case of the occupation as part of the project *Housing frontline: modelli di inclusione abitativa e sociale attraverso processi di autocostruzione e autorecuperò*<sup>1</sup> (housing and social inclusion models through self-building and self-recovery processes).

I was responsible for the ethnographic part of this work, in a first, prolonged phase as a researcher and coordinator of a team that was to carry out a series of ethnographic interviews for the purpose of creating a social framework of the inhabitants. On that occasion I designed a database (to which I refer in several parts of the volume), to collect and process information referring to each of the occupying families, who had been given a reference number for identification. In that period, I always went there and my presence covered the whole day, from morning to late evening. By doing this I established my first relationships, which grew deeper and deeper, with many Romanian families and with the Italian inhabitants.

I immediately realised that the Romanians belonged to minorities and I understood that almost all of them were *rudari*. I remember that shortly after I had begun to frequent the former Luzzi, I went to meet Constantin, the person who the Romanian occupants indicated as a sort of 'head' of the occupation. I fully understood this figure only later, in Romania, when I realised that his function could be assimilated to the historical figure, present among the *rudari*, of the *vătaf* (see chapter 1).

In one of our early conversations, at one point I put my intuition to the test and asked Constantin what their mother tongue was. He replied,

'*il romeno*' (Romanian). Then I asked him how they were considered in Romania. He looked at me, waited a moment and said to me, '*noi siamo rudari* [we are *rudari*], means, as in your country ... you are Italians, but you are Tuscans'.

Little by little the internal networks became clearer to me, but it took a lot of time and space for someone who does not belong to them before they finally lost the apparently tangled form that the extended and transnational families possess.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 2009, I decided to make my first trip to Romania. I had said to the families of the Luzzi that I would go and see them: 'Really? Will you come to Romania?' they asked me.

When I reached Constanța, I realised that I only had Italian mobile phone numbers ... and they did not work. So, I went to Sibiu Mare without knowing exactly where to go: at the time I hadn't thought, I could not have understood then, that it would have been enough to walk into the town and I would surely meet someone in the street who would recognise me. So, somewhat naively, I went to the Town Hall and introduced myself as an Italian researcher and asked if they could accompany me to the families I knew, telling them some surnames. I recall the glances that the employees exchanged with each other, a mixture of incredulity and suspicion.

The first person they took me to see was Constantin's brother. He was a person, to tell the truth, who I had not had much to do with in the previous months during my fieldwork at the former Luzzi and who, in fact, received me rather suspiciously, above all because I was being accompanied by a municipal clerk. It was clear that he was wondering whether I had precise reasons for coming to Sibiu Mare.

Fortunately, I managed to get free of the clerk almost immediately and soon after, I found a family that I knew well: as I approached a house along the road, the children recognised me and ran toward me; it was the house of Lucian and Mălina. They welcomed me and offered me something to eat and drink, and went immediately to call their closest relatives who had been with them at the Luzzi and lived in Romania, just a few metres away – Lucian's sister and her husband, Ionica and Virgil. This couple invited me to dinner the following day and Șerban, the oldest son, gave me his Romanian mobile phone number so I could call him. I phoned him the next day, as agreed, and he asked me straight away if I would really come; he seemed very pleased. When I arrived, there to meet me was a 'piece' of their large nuclear family, comprising the parents and their eleven children. The house was the old one, which no longer exists, built by Virgil with his own hands. A *rudărească* house, made of earth and straw, of *adobe*. They had installed the electricity with an improvised system and in this way they could get the fridge, sent from Italy, to work. For the meal

there were only fizzy drinks, which I drank out of respect and in exchange for their hospitality without saying that I couldn't manage such quantities. So, the next day, which was Ferragosto, a public holiday, I spent the whole day with a blanket on a beach sunbed at Mamaia, a well-known, bustling tourist resort in the city of Constanța, and I left the following day.

This dinner proved to be a founding moment, the beginning of a friendship; now it is also a remembrance of Virgil, who has left us.

Of all the Italians – from those for whom they worked, to those who lived in the occupied houses – who, over the years had said that they would go and visit them in Romania, in fact I was the only one who had kept my promise, and the tale of this first visit of mine was told for many years. 'So, Sabrina, you really came?!', almost as though they could hardly believe that I was there, in 2009 at Sibiu Mare, because such behaviour toward them was not in line with their expectations of the relationships they had with Italian people. Their amazement was immediately followed by strong appreciation: in the consistency between my words and deeds, they read respect and appreciation, which from that moment have always been reciprocated.

I had thus opened a new field of research: from the urban context of precarious living (occupations, unauthorised settlements etc.) to the mobility and the migratory processes of a large network of *rudari* families, which would be intertwined with the genealogical reconstruction of the cultural 'patterns' and historical events in Romania.

## Between Italy and Romania

In the way that I have written the text, I have tried to link in time and space some of the issues that make sense in the families' present lives – lives that often come up against problems of an economic nature and concerning health, with sudden or too swift changes, and with nostalgia and solitude. A fundamental feature that emerged from the start is family bonds, which I have seen over all these years as constantly central to their social organisation, both in Romania and in the migrations. If we just think of the emic explanation of the term *rudari* – 'rudari because we are all related',<sup>3</sup> they told me – we can immediately realise that the path of kinship had to be tackled and followed in order to reach the heart of these groups of families. Part of the work is therefore dedicated to understanding which features make the people in our reference family network feel they are part of a specific *we* – the elaboration of a feeling of union among them, which produces a boundary and which enables a distinction to be made between oneself and the others, a boundary maintained through endogamic marriages.

We are clearly in the minefield of what are defined as processes of ‘ethnisation’, deeply pervaded with changes and the result of complex contextual dynamics. The intention, however, as we shall see, is not so much to dwell on questions concerning the *rudari* in general, as to show in practice the intertwining of self-attributions and hetero-attributions, referring to our family groups, in precise space and time contexts.

In Romania the *rudari* are considered *gypsies*, but they do not consider themselves as such, and still less as Roma. Often with migration into Western European countries, in the new contexts they are not recognised as *gypsies* and can therefore introduce themselves as *romeni* (*Romanians*), and be seen as such. *Par contre*, the connotation of *gypsies* regains value in the (rare) cases in which they practise begging.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is fundamental to understand the inner meaning of ‘*rudari*’ in relation to specific groups, the categorisation made by the society in which they are living, the consequences in the contexts of the origin of the discriminations associated with the connotation of *gypsies*, but also how they themselves sometimes ‘play’ this identity attribution, turning it in their favour. Likened to the Roma minority, both in Romania and in other Balkan countries, they find it difficult to escape this, even for researchers.

Therefore, I will try to reflect on the processes that have led to the establishment of the family groups we refer to as a *we* and how this has been maintained, in reference not so much to the generic category of *rudari*, used by society, by the institutions and by scholars themselves, but to the inner depth of relationships with those specific groups. How this *we* becomes a resource in the migrations in order not to *get lost* as individuals and family nuclei.<sup>5</sup> How this *we* in Romanian villages is translated into relationships with the Roma, and interpreted by the Romanian majority, configuring the relations among these different groups also in terms of space. Which opportunities emerge or are denied as the result of the relationships, there in Romania, and here in Florence, where the word ‘*rudari*’ does not exist, but in which they follow a destiny like that of the migrants who come from similar situations of great socio-economic difficulty. I will speak of the *rudari* as *gypsies* where it makes sense in the specific context, meaning this denomination as the result of a long history that in our case, today, in Romania, we find in the configuration of relations between the various groups of inhabitants of the villages (*rudari*, Roma and ‘Romanian Romanians’ as ‘my’ families would call them), in the general perception of the *rudari* as *gypsies* by mainstream society and in their relations with the institutions.<sup>6</sup> I shall speak of them therefore, from a ‘gypsiological’ perspective (that critically explores the relationship between *gypsies* and *non-gypsies*) and never as Roma.

It is a paradigmatic case that allows us to investigate the meaning of the present in an ethnonym, in the light of the past and in different life

contexts. For minority groups, the question of how the majority ‘creates’ them, ‘thinks’ of them and the treatment it reserves for them, just as how they themselves ‘create’ themselves and ‘think’ of themselves, are fundamental processes for the real lives of the people involved, for whom they open, close or transform real possibilities.

If the local dimension, as Appadurai (2013) also suggests, is revealed as the repertoire of the ‘conditions of possibilities’ based on which individuals and groups experience themselves and establish their future, we should also ask ourselves about how the two migratory localities – that of the city of immigration and that of the village of emigration (where the experiences of the other migrants also converge) – interact and enter the process of a new thinkability, practicability and therefore mobility of things concerning our own lives, the ones that we consider important and how to fulfil them, between constrictions, imagination and aspirations.

Mobility is embedded in the history of this large network of Romanian *rudari* families, strictly linked to their social and economic organisation, and the rise of the network itself. Furthermore, the socio-spatial morphogenesis of the villages of origin (that I found in the present) is the ‘product’ of the mobility (by choice, induced or forced) of the families during their history. The volume is divided into two parts: the first (‘History and Mobility’) delves into the micro-history of this group of *rudari lingurari*,<sup>7</sup> mapping the spatial and geographical mobility of the families – characterised by border-crossing, deportations and forced transfers – since the end of the nineteenth century, and intertwining it with the genealogical space and with their social and economic organisation. All this allows us to understand the present of cultural and relational frames, and mobility (chosen, induced or forced) as the principal ground of the flexibility through which they face economic and social situations, the perception and management of time and space of their life. The second part, ‘The Time of Migrations: Home, Mobility and Transnationalism’, focuses on the families’ mobility today. Adopting a ‘moving gaze’ that I define as ‘pendular’, I have explored the migration paths of the families in various countries, their experiences related to the occupations of uninhabited buildings (in Italy), the homing processes (both in Italy and Romania), the movement of objects, ideas and imaginaries, the movement/displacement in time of the sense of presence and being at home, and the meaning of the movement/displacement among the different generations of the families’ members. The *rudari* family-cultural intimacy joins the forms of mobility and the marriage patterns, which shape the transnational configurations that life histories reveal, together with the aspirations of people and the transformations faced in their lives and in their multiple life contexts.

The interweaving of micro and macro, the continual intersecting of cultural elements and social configurations, are proposed throughout the text for a prismatic interpretation of the dynamics that intervene in mobility and migratory processes. *What does migration do to the people we are referring to? To those who leave, and to those who remain? What do they feel? How and on what basis do they transform their lives?*

What I am presenting is a dense, suffering mobility, in which the protagonists find an anchorage in cultural intimacy, which enables them to face the multiple social insecurities, to which, in the present historical context, the majority of the population is increasingly exposed. In this sense their lives also speak of ours, in a reflexive circularity that places them and us in a *common history*.

### Methodological Note

The Romanian *rudari* families in my research come from south east Romania, in particular from the Region of Muntenia, *Județul* (district of) Călărași, and from the Region of Dobruja, *Județul* Constanța. The context is rural; there are several villages,<sup>8</sup> situated on the Lower Danube (*Dunărea de Jos*) and near the artificial canals leading from the great river to the Black Sea, built during the communist regime and the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu (in the vicinity of the city of Medgidia, approximately 40 km from the city of Constanța). This territorial provenance is the product of a social and historical process, which I reconstruct throughout the text. It represents the spatial dislocation of relations within the families in the network, linked to the socio-spatial morphogenesis of the villages.

When I explained to the families about the research that I wanted to continue with them, as well as the work done at the former Luzzi, they immediately translated my intention, within their network, as the fact that I would write ‘a book on the *rudari*’. This book, then, I promised to Gelu’s family, I will dedicate to him, who one evening at their house, during the occupation of the former hospital, said to me, ‘You must come and stay with us, so you can learn our language and understand many things’.

From 2009 to 2020 I went through many phases of field research and study, so that my ties with the *rudari* slackened and tightened several times, becoming enriched and more complicated with interpersonal relationships – as a friend and then ‘sister’, ‘niece’, ‘aunt’ – becoming intertwined also with the activities associated with the matter of the former Luzzi and those of the *Movimento di Lotta per la Casa* (Movement for the Fight for Housing) – and above all the flow of life events, daily and extraordinary, joyous and sorrowful, involving them and me.

My research in the Italian context was more prolonged; the thread with Romania has always been kept, with periods in which it was easier to cultivate the ethnographic field in the country of origin.<sup>9</sup>

My acquaintance with these families for many years has given me the opportunity to see over time different kinds of changes in their biographies and in various contexts. Then the fact that I was *acasă în România* (at home in Romania), accompanying different people in the family in time (the eldest daughter and the children, the mother, the eldest daughter and her husband, the eldest son, at the time their house was being built, or alone with the grandmother etc.), enabled me to understand relational balances and social situations involving knowledge and skills that I had to develop, sometimes making mistakes in my behaviour, which were moments rich in ethnographic learning.<sup>10</sup>

The creation of a database in 2009 based on information gathered during the occupation of the former Luzzi between March and July of that year, the subsequent experience of negotiation and the deeper knowledge of my families, enables me to provide a longitudinal summary overview of some spheres of the migratory experience of this network of families.<sup>11</sup>

During the ethnographic fieldwork various interviews were also recorded: in August 2011, five in Romania and two in Bulgaria; sixteen in Florence in the months of January and February 2015; and three in Romania between March and April of the same year.<sup>12</sup>

### Linguistic Note

The Romanian dialect spoken by the *rudari* is identified by linguists as 'archaic' Romanian, dating back to the dialects spoken in south west Transylvania in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, south east of Crişana and to the north east of the Banato, subsequently influenced by travel and in particular by the Romanian Valacchia dialects (Calotă 1995).

While I was in Oltenia, in 2015, thanks to Nicolae Panea of the University of Craiova, I was able to contact at the same university, Ovidiu Drăghici, a linguist and student of Ion Calotă, who had done plenty of research on the *rudar* dialect (Calotă 1974; 1995; 1996).

Asked to listen to some recorded interviews, Drăghici immediately identified the specific phonetism of this dialect, represented by the phenomenon of palatalisation. This characteristic is very noticeable among the elderly or among young people who have undergone only a short period of schooling. People in Romania who have attended classes up to professional diploma level usually speak Romanian with a less palatalised sonority.



Also from a terminological point of view, while familiar with the dialectal words used by the elders, younger people tend to lose them as they grow up.

Below are some of the terms and expressions of the *rudar* dialect used by the families, with the corresponding Romanian terms next to them and the English translation in brackets:

*Anghețată – Înghețată* (ice cream)

*Bardă – topor* (little axe or bill hook). *Bardă* exists also in Romanian but seems not to be used for that type of tool.

*Cartoafe – cartofi* (potatoes)

*Cherpedean – cleste* (pliers)

*Copăie – albie*. *Copăie* literally means ‘trough’ in Romanian. It indicates a wooden receptacle, bigger than a tub, *albie*, of an elongated shape, used once used both to make bread, and among the *rudari* to cradle a baby.

*Ciușcă – ardei iute* (chilli pepper, from the Bulgarian *chushka*)

*Cuțit de linguri* (special knife to carve spoons used by the *rudari lingurari*)

*Dadă* (used as a mark of respect toward an older person of the female gender, e.g. *Dădă Rada*). In Romanian the term is indicated as a regional word used by peasants.

*Fa – ma* (used in expressions such as ‘fa fata ce faci?’, ‘what are you doing, my girl?’)

*Fe* (used to address someone very colloquially, like ‘Oh’)

*Halvașele – drojdie* (leavening, but *halvașele* is actually the yeast made in *rudari* fashion)

*Logodeala – logodnă* (engagement)

*Nădragi – pantaloni* (trousers)

*Nána/Nene* (used as a mark of respect toward an older person of the male gender, e.g. *Nene Radu*).

*Paar – Pahar* (glass)

*Pîne – pîine* (bread)

*Stergár – prosop* (towel)

*Suite în pat – urcă în pat* (climb onto the bed)

*Toala/toale – haine/rufe* (clothes)

*Treapă – rupt/cârpă* (rag)

*Zar – zahăr* (sugar)

## Further Information

The Italian edition of the volume was published in 2021 by Mimesis (Milan, Italy); this English original version contains several changes and updates.

The English translation of the text, including citations from the foreign-language sources listed in the bibliography, is by Angela Whitehouse and me.

Pseudonyms are used (or the initials of names) for the *rudari* people involved in the research, and also for the Romanian localities of origin, which in the parts of a more historical character are marked with an asterisk.

The interviews and conversations are transcribed accurately, reproducing any inaccuracies on the part of the interlocutor.

Lastly, the maps in the first part of the text were made with the graphic support of Caterina Cirri.

## Notes

1. Experience brought together in Marcetti et al. (2011).
2. We can envisage this process subdivided into three phases: the first, in which I met the families; the second, when I discovered that these are ‘tips of the iceberg’ of transnational nuclei and networks that are ‘tangled’ and with no precise limits. Then later, over time, I started to create some order, gradually identifying behavioural patterns that go beyond linguistic classifications and show that the ‘family’ is built from daily practices (which are a fundamental part of this study). The verbal actions, in the form of conversations, to explain to me for example, who is the brother of whom, which initially confused me, acquire their own meaning in their being discursive practices of a constant building of kinship, and not a mere description. The aforementioned ‘tanglement’ is a sort of intermediate phase from which – thanks to a prolonged ethnographic experience – patterns emerge, creating interpretative categories of the kinship network.
3. The word *rudlă* in Romanian means ‘relative’, and it is from this that my interlocutors derive the term ‘*rudari*’. In the literature, however, the most commonly accepted interpretation is that it derives from *ruda* (metal), a word of Slav origin. Already in the nineteenth century, in fact, authors associated the *bajeși* with those who extracted gold in the mines and the *rudari* with the gold prospectors in rivers and streams (Fotino 1859), and therefore the names themselves derive from regional expressions, like the Romanian *baie* (mine) and the Slav *ruda* (metal). Groups of *rudari* have spread through the Balkans, and their names vary according to the different regions: in Muntenia they are called, above all, *rudari*; in Transylvania *bajeși*; in Oltenia *rudari* and *bajeși*; in Hungary *beás* e *bojaš*; in Moldova, *lingurari* is more frequently used; in Bulgaria *kopanari* and *rudari*, but then divided into *lingurari* and *ursari*; in Croatia *koritari* and *bajaš*; in Serbia *karavlaši*, but sometimes also *lingurari* and in certain areas *banjaš*. These are almost always names of trades, but the groups outside Romania insist that they are Romanian, to the point that they sometimes called themselves

simply *rumuni* (in Serbia) or *vlași* or *vlahi*, and in Bosnia they are the *karavlași*, all expressions that mean ‘Romanians’.

4. See Teodorescu (2020).
5. I refer to Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino – ‘two antithetical terrors inform the age we live in: that of ‘losing the world’ and that of ‘being lost in the world’” (de Martino 2002: 475). This is extremely significant in rendering how the experience of passing from one world to another, and of going beyond the confines of the known world, can be terrifying in terms of sense and meanings. See also chapter 14.
6. ‘Historical destiny, that is, if we consider the present, the political situation within a larger social whole, shapes the aspect of such a group. This is as much an identity for others as it is an identity for oneself. For all groups designated with the term “Gypsies” (or any other equivalent appellation), however different from each other, it is in this dimension – a dimension that, just as much as cultural traits and embodied culture, participates in the definition of identity – that the stereotypes and prejudices imposed on them by the societies they have gone through or to which they belong, are introduced. This is how the collective level comes to impose itself on that of the single community and even on that of the individual’ (Williams 2011: 9).
7. As highlighted above, considered *gypsies* in Romania and, with different names, in the Balkans but not in Italy and in other migration contexts, I’m going to discuss also their movement between these ethnic borders. *Lingurari* means makers of spoons, from *lingure* in Romanian, spoon, and that in a broader sense indicates, indeed, the makers of tools for the home. The micro-history of the families intersects the great History of the *Cadrilater* between the First and the Second World War, the shifting of the Romanian-Bulgarian borders and the population exchange, the arrival of communism, the abandonment of the *lingurari* craft, the end of the regime, the increase in poverty and the departure.
8. In the text I will frequently use the corresponding Romanian word *sat* (singular).
9. I carried out research in Romania in the following periods: mid-August to early September 2016; 21 July to 12 September 2015; 17 March to 7 April 2015; 14 to 29 August 2014; 10 to 22 August 2012; August 2011; October 2010; 28 October to 14 November 2009; 12 to 25 August 2009.
10. As narrated in chapter 12, dedicated to the house in Romania.
11. When providing quantitative data, the families’ identification numbers (ID) to which the information refers will be given. The tables drawn up will therefore provide an overall view of the 2009–2019 decade, above all concerning working and living conditions. The Filemaker programme was used for the preparation of the database.
12. The interviews in 2015 were organised thanks to the opportunity I was given by my participation in that year, as a research fellow, in the *MigRom* project – *The Immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, Effects, and Future Engagement Strategies*, <http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/>. For the majority of the interviews I was accompanied by Mara Stinga, who transcribed the texts, together with Angela Petre. The translations were done by the latter and me, with Alexandra Anghel’s support. The interviews were conducted with people I had known for many years, who agreed to be interviewed precisely due to the relationship of trust that had been built up over time. Mara, Angela and Alexandra’s collaboration is also to be understood in this sense.