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# Rural Libraries of Romania

## Libraries and the Information Infrastructure of Rural Romania

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### ABSTRACT:

In May 2005 faculty and students from Emporia State University and Ball State University visited Lunca Ilvei, a small mountain village in rural Romania, to gather qualitative information on its information infrastructure. Researchers interviewed diverse village residents, taking field notes, documenting field observations, and conducting surveys, all recorded photographically.

This paper focuses on Lunca Ilvei's libraries and how they fit into the village's information structure. It reports on the research findings and suggests ways to help village residents address their information needs.

An Eastern European country, Romania is known for having been a communist nation in the twentieth century. Once the despots Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were deposed and executed in 1989, Romania began the arduous task of becoming a democratic nation, a process that is still in progress. One of the institutions greatly affected has been the library. In this paper I will discuss Romanian libraries in general and in particular, the libraries in and the information infrastructure of a village in Transylvania.

### A Brief History of Libraries in Romania

Early libraries in Romania were monastic libraries that were founded beginning in the fourteenth century in the principalities now known as Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania. As expected, the bulk of those collections were of a religious nature, but "more comprehensive collections included works on literature, history, philosophy, and law" (Angelescu, 2000, p. 83). Ruling princes founded extensive court libraries in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, collecting illuminated manuscripts and incunabula from Europe and Asia (Angelescu, 2001). Also existing during that time were private libraries belonging to scholars and dignitaries. During the sixteenth century, school libraries began their activities in conjunction with college libraries. A subsequent library at St. Sava College in Bucharest in the 1830s acquired the status of National Library, with a collection of 10,000 volumes.

A public library appears to have existed in the medieval city of Sibiu at the end of the thirteenth century (Angelescu, 2000); however, public libraries did not become commonplace until the nineteenth century. The end of the Russo-Turkish war (1828-29) led to the enactment of the Organic Regulations, which provided the first public library legislation in Romania, leading to the emergence of a network of public libraries. The 1864 *Regulamentul pentru bibliotecile publice* (*Public Library Regulations*)

stated that the entire country should enjoy the benefits of libraries, "therefore, small libraries will be established in villages, communes, towns" (as cited in Angelescu, 2000, p. 138). The government provided some of the books for those libraries, while local teachers and priests donated the rest.

The foundation of the Romanian republic in 1877, followed by rapid economic, social, and educational growth, led to an increased need for information. This resulted in the foundation of universities and the establishment of the academic library system.

Partly because of a movement encouraging people to read, following World War I there was an unprecedented growth in libraries, as well as in collection development, and in the number of library users. As a consequence, Romanian librarians began to pursue an education in library science. A significant number went to France to study at the Ecole des Chartes and the Collège de France, as well as at the International Institute of Bibliography in Brussels. In addition, many visited major libraries in Italy, Germany, or Austria, returning home with new ideas garnered from Western European librarianship. Some of those librarians became professors of library science at the Universities of Bucharest and Cluj.

Following World War I the public library system underwent a complete reorganization. A 1919 decree specified that public libraries, along with other libraries, would come under the jurisdiction of the Schools Administration and People's Culture (Angelescu, 2000). The purpose was to make the libraries more open to the public, as well as to facilitate the exchange of books from one library to another, a form of interlibrary loan.

A portion of a 1924 law on elementary education in rural areas focused on school and public libraries in villages. From 1924 to 1927 the supervising agency established 7,436 libraries in rural areas, with collections numbering 1,300,000 volumes. Unfortunately,

the 1929–1933 economic recession adversely affected the libraries, so that by 1938 the number of rural libraries had dropped by two thirds (Anghelescu, 2000).

A 1932 law separated the public libraries from school libraries, placing the public libraries under the supervision and support of the local governments. The Romanian government enforced the decree by not approving any local government budget that did not fund the library.

In a 1938 report, Dimitrie Gusti emphasized the importance of rural libraries, viewing them as a vital part of the culture of a village. Illiteracy was a major problem at that time, and he considered the library to be an important player in raising the literacy of those areas, with the librarian guiding what was read in the village (Anghelescu, 2000). Gusti also accused authors of writing for the urban audience, and encouraged them to write more for the rural inhabitants, who comprised the bulk of the country's population. To close his report Gusti stated the role and significance of libraries as cultural institutions:

1. The village library is a tool meant to elevate the mind and the soul such as a conference, or a visit to a museum.
2. The village library is not an institution per se. It is organically integrated into the cultural center, the cultural establishment of the village.
3. The village library is not part of an establishment which serves only one side of the village's life, such as the school, church, or the mayor's hall.
4. The library is unique for the entire community, for all the social categories and for all ages (as cited in Anghelescu, 2000, p. 202).

After the 1945 communist takeover of Romania, libraries flourished, primarily because the government chose to use them as a propaganda tool, spreading its ideology to the masses in every corner of the country. The regime made it a priority to place Soviet publications in libraries, sending 10,000 to 15,000 translated pages to Romanian libraries each month (Anghelescu, 2000). In addition,

they established libraries at an accelerated pace, even though towns had an acute shortage of buildings, staff, and books. They solved the space problem by confiscating buildings from private citizens and organizations. During the 45 years of communism fewer than ten libraries were constructed. Loyal party members were appointed as librarians. By 1949 the main goals for library activities, as laid out by the government were:

1. To explain in lay terms to the patrons the decisions taken at Party and Government level, the Government's present political agenda, and the international political situation.
2. To help the patrons obtain the information they needed in the different domains of science, technology, economics, literature, and art.
3. To support local institutions and organizations to improve their operations, primarily by becoming familiar with new methods of production, and to increase the use of local resources (Anghelescu, 2000, p. 252).

Hermina Anghelescu (2000) reports in her dissertation that in the late 1940s libraries, particularly rural libraries, were expected to grow, but received little money to do so. To keep their jobs, librarians often falsified reports. For example, the 1948 statistics showed an increase of 305.5% in rural library holdings from the previous year.

Immediately following World War II, the government banned pro-Nazi publications; however, as the communists gained greater control, they began to ban other books, particularly those on capitalism and religion. Besides the Soviet and communist publications, libraries were permitted to circulate books that fell into three primary categories: science, technology, and literature. The books that were banned were given a special collection classification with the title of "Fond S," with "Fond" standing for "collection" and the "S" representing "forbidden" (Anghelescu, 2001). Each county library had a Fond S that was catalogued and kept separate from the regular circulation fond. Patrons wishing to use publications from the Fond S had to request

*Many librarians defied the regime by hiding [banned materials] or turning their backs while other librarians took them home.*

*The literacy rate  
is a phenomenal  
98.4% with  
99.1% of all  
males over age  
19 able to read  
and write.*

them from the head librarian, who was to report to the government those researchers who were interested in taboo subjects. Eventually, the government ordered all the Fond S materials destroyed, but many librarians defied the regime by hiding them or turning their backs while other librarians took them home.<sup>1</sup> In 1990, following the Revolution, the “S” fonds were incorporated into the regular collections, but their bibliographical cards continue to bear the “S” symbol so that future generations may learn which documents were denied to their ancestors. Those who wish to better understand this horrible time in Romanian history should read the study of the Fond S conducted by Ionu Costea (1995) and his colleagues.

During communism, rural libraries were usually housed in the local town hall or another municipal building. In 1966 Ceausescu encouraged urban libraries to help rural libraries, particularly with staff training. Such state mandated activities did help to create a uniform national library system, and a government publication, *Călăuza bibliotecarului* (The Librarian’s Guide), set out the following standards for rural libraries:

The reading room will have, as furniture, a big table in the middle with chairs all around, or, preferably, several smaller tables; the book case, and, in a corner, to dominate the entire room, the librarian’s desk. The furniture will be simple and economical, crafted by the villagers (as cited in Anghelescu, 2000, p. 260).

By the 1970s the government had lost its interest in libraries, which had been created to spread the “gospel” of communism. Its mission had been accomplished with the stabilization of the communist government, so the party no longer needed libraries, and began dismantling them. The regime determined that all manuscript collections of historical value should be removed from private and religious libraries. Proper storage areas were few, so the government moved many of these valuable collections to inadequate, damp, storage spaces. Often they did not leave any record of the place to which the collections had been moved, making it difficult or impossible for many materials to be returned to their rightful owners following the fall of communism. According to Martyn Rady (1991), more than

200 church archives lost materials because of this action.

In 1974 the last library school closed for three reasons: “the low visibility of the library institution on the Romanian cultural and educational scene, the low status of the library profession in the Romanian communist society, and the lack of specialized faculty at the library school” (Anghelescu, 2000, p. 339). The regime had come to believe that anybody with a master’s degree could be a librarian, thinking all they had to do was dust shelves and retrieve and shelve books. Instead of attending library school, prospective librarians were required to take propaganda classes, earning them the title “book propagandists.”

In spite of his diminished interest in libraries, Ceaușescu determined to leave the legacy of a national library, which he ordered built. It was not completely finished when he dedicated it in 1989, shortly before his ouster and execution. With some books moved in, the building was unused for several years before other governmental departments appropriated it for office space. In the meantime, the National Library has had to make do with the old stock exchange building, which is so inadequate that books can be kept only in the basement, for fear of placing too much strain on the walls. No more than one million of its 13 million books are available to the public; the rest are stored in warehouses. According to Tamsin McMahan and Dawn Withers (2003), the government in 2003 agreed to allow the National Library to move into its intended building, a move that has yet to take place, partly because \$60 million is needed for the building’s completion.

Because of Romania’s economic problems following the 1989 revolution, libraries received little funding. In 2001 public libraries were returned to local governmental control, but very few were given the resources to do more than to archive their collections. Anghelescu (2000) does point out that since the revolution a well-defined library network has been in place.

In 1990 the University of Bucharest opened a Department of Library and Information Science. Unfortunately, its curriculum does not cover such areas as information retrieval,

reference services, and new technologies, because there have been no faculty to teach them. Instead, there are “classes in Latin, Church Slavonic, book and library history, cataloging, and classification” (Anghelescu, 2001, p. 237).

During the 1989 coup many of the revolutionaries entered libraries, destroying any communist literature they could find; however some quick-thinking librarians hid the most important resources for future research. Library collection activities were so outdated in 1990 that the National Library’s collection lagged 15 years behind national libraries in other countries (Anghelescu, 2001). To help improve their collection, several international organizations, particularly those from other formerly communist countries, have provided them with technical assistance, books, and periodicals. The American Library Association, in addition to conducting colloquia for Romania librarians in 1991 and 1996, sent 250,000 books to Romania in 1990 (American Library Association, 1996). In spite of the aid, most libraries still use printed card catalogs because of technology and conversion costs. When Anghelescu published her article in 2001, few libraries were automated. Many libraries today still do not have computers, to say nothing of high-speed Internet access.

## Method

In 2003 Dr. James M. Nyce, an associate professor of the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University, and Dr. Gail Bader, an assistant professor of anthropology at Ball State University, visited the village of Lunca Ilvei in Transylvania in the northeastern part of Romania. Following their visit they determined that the village (population 4000, including the environs) would be a good field site to research micro levels of Global Information Infrastructure (GII) and National Information Infrastructure (NII). Nyce, with the support of the SLIM administration, then developed two classes, one in the spring to prepare for the study trip, and the second in the summer of 2004, during which this fieldwork took place. Throughout the spring class the students conducted a literature search on Romania, compiling an extensive bibliography to help

with the planning and research for the trip, which occurred at the end of the semester.

Because of our research, we knew something about Romania and its economy; however, that is a poor substitute for actually visiting the country and experiencing its culture first hand. In Bucharest, as well as on the train ride to Lunca Ilvei, we saw vestiges of the former communist influence: large, drab, concrete apartment buildings, as well as remnants of state and cooperative farms. Bucharest had a subway system, but in the rural areas it was common to see people traveling by horse cart.

On May 16, 2004, seven Americans gathered in Lunca Ilvei: Nyce and three graduate students from SLIM’s spring Romania class, Bader and an undergraduate anthropology student, and the team’s photographer. Each day faculty and students together interviewed people from all walks of life who lived in the village or nearby. Because most of these people did not speak English, we used the same interpreter for the interviews, a young village woman who had taught in the local schools. As often as possible, the interviews were audiotaped, yet each person took field notes. Every day, following the interviews, the team met to discuss and analyze the day’s findings, and to determine the next day’s research agenda. The photographer, as well as some of the students, documented not only this fieldwork, but also village life.

Because it was a mountain village with no area for large collective farms, farmers in the Lunca Ilvei area were allowed to keep their farms. According to Cornelia, the public librarian (private communication, February 16, 2004), the local forests did not fare so well. They became state property and only after the Revolution were they returned to their rightful owners. The regime had planned to abolish Lunca Ilvei as an administrative unit, but did not do so. Presently it has a mayor who was re-elected shortly after we were there. He was one of the first persons we interviewed; the manager of the huge wood factory was one of the last.

Once we arrived at the village we found that virtually all homes had vegetable and flower gardens in their front yards. The main street was paved for perhaps a mile each way from

*[the Mayor] suggested that people, if they need a book, should go buy it. But what if they do not have the money to do so?*

the center of town, but other streets were gravel or dirt. The small, local, family-run stores (*magazins*) were similar to the general stores in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only with less merchandise (see figure 1); however, once a week there was an outdoor market where villagers could purchase a greater variety of items. Almost every family we interviewed had a television, stove, and refrigerator. Many also had telephone service and indoor plumbing. Although fiber optic cable ran through the village, residents used dial-up Internet connection because of the lack of capital to connect the servers and associated equipment.

After having been in the village several days we traveled to the province of Moldavia to view the famous “Painted Monasteries,” a museum, and a salt mine. While on this excursion we conducted informal interviews, made field observations, and took notes, looking for things that were similar and/or different between Lunca Ilvei and other Romanian towns. An example was our looking for magazines and “hi-tech” consumer goods, such as DVDs and rewritable CDs. Not unlike the United States, these products were more easily found in the larger towns.



Figure 1. Lunca Ilvei Magazin (General Store). Photo by Craig French



Figure 2. School Library with Checkout Cards at Bottom of Picture. Photo by Mary Ann Littrell

The first interview that we conducted in the village was a visit to a local school. Lunca Ilvei has four primary schools, with the older children attending school in a nearby town. One good result of communism was an emphasis on education: the literacy rate is a phenomenal 98.4%, with 99.1% of all males over age 19 able to read and write (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2005). In addition to Romanian, the schools offer language classes in English and French.

The school we visited taught children ages seven through fourteen (first through eighth form). We visited each class, asking the students and teachers questions about their information infrastructure, and

answering their questions about the United States. In addition, the principal showed us the computer lab, with its ten student computers, as well as the library, which provided books not only for that school, but also for the other three village schools.

The library is in one room on the top floor of a new annex for the youngest grades. The principal and later the librarian estimated that there were 6,000 books in its collection (see figure 2). In addition to books in Romanian, we found multiple copies of French classical literature, as well as a few in English, including a few Mark Twain novels. Noticeably absent were communist party tracts or Soviet literature.

The librarian, who was also the school’s secretary, told us she had taken some classes in librarianship. The books were shelved in alphabetical order, but not otherwise cataloged. On the librarian’s desk in one corner was a box of checkout cards. The librarian said she would like to have a computer and cataloging program for her library. The school library had some DVDs and was waiting to get computers from the government, which had promised 25 to the school.

The computer lab in the school’s main building used a shared 56K modem for Internet access, making the connection speed 5.6K if all were connected at the same time. Students spent an hour each week in the computer lab, often doing research. The computers had Microsoft Office and graphics programs on them. The teachers we interviewed said that parents generally believe it is important for their children to learn how to use computers to help prepare them for life. Only ten or eleven of the 40 village teachers have computers at home, primarily because of the cost: a \$1000 computer is difficult to purchase when a person is making only 100€ (c. \$122) per month.

Another person we interviewed was the librarian of the public library, who is also the mayor’s secretary. The library, established in 1964 during the period when the communist regime was rapidly creating libraries to spread their propaganda, was located in Lunca Ilvei’s town hall. We were told that its collection numbered 8,000 volumes. Unfortunately, the

books were all in storage while the building was being remodeled. Upon entering the town hall we were shown two small rooms where the library had been located. Outside we saw two sets of shelves, each approximately 18 feet long and four rows high, which we were told had been the library's shelving.

According to the librarian, the bulk of the library's collection consisted of literature and children's books. Each is classified with a number using the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), which is used extensively in libraries throughout Romania, as well as in Europe (Anghelescu, 2000; Chung, 1995). She catalogs literature by author, and non-fiction by subject. To find books to check out, patrons may either browse the shelves or use a card or paper catalog. It was unclear whether villagers had to pay to obtain a library card.<sup>2</sup> The librarian not only took library courses in Bucharest, but also obtained practical training at a public library in Bistrița, a city some 80 kilometers from Lunca Ilvei.

We were told that for the 2003–2004 fiscal year the village budgeted approximately 50 million lei (c. \$1515 U.S.) for the library, an increase (partly because of inflation) of 20 million lei (c. \$612) from the previous year. Part of the budget goes for the librarian's salary, and part for books, which the librarian said she orders three to four times a year from Romanian publishers. She gets suggestions for books from patrons, particularly adult fiction and children's books. If necessary, she is able to borrow books from other libraries. As with the school librarian, the town librarian would like to have a computer and Internet access in the library.

### Analysis

According to Jean and Peter Lanjouw (as cited in Breitschopf and Schrieder, 2000), a rural locality consists of 5,000 or fewer inhabitants. Accordingly, Lunca Ilvei can be considered representative of the rural villages and population of Romania. In her dissertation Anghelescu (2000) states that many of the world's libraries are in rural areas, so it is necessary to consider Lunca Ilvei's libraries in this light.

When we compared the two village libraries, we found we had similar questions about both. First of all, both librarians worked in the library only part-time. The school librarian was the school secretary, while the public librarian was the mayor's secretary. Was there so little to do that both librarians needed other tasks to provide a full-time job, or did the principal and mayor not give the libraries the priority that they needed? Anghelescu (in press) notes that most Romanian libraries have been hurt by the economy and poor working conditions, as well as a low social status for librarians. Some Romanian librarians, faced with low prestige, avoid using their title on their business cards (Anghelescu, 2001). It was heartening that both librarians had received some library training, even though it was not a library degree.

Another question concerned the number of books reported for both libraries. While many of the school's books were thin, they appeared to number 600–800, not the reported 6000. It is possible that several of the books were checked out, but was that number high enough to compensate for the discrepancy? Because of the town hall's remodeling, we did not see the public library's collection; however, it was difficult to imagine those two small rooms' holding 8000 books, let alone any furniture. The question that occurred to us was whether the numbers were inflated. Is this an example of "demand characteristic," in which respondents say what they think the researchers want to hear (Case, 2002)? When people from a country are inquiring about statistics in another country, it is very tempting for the hosts to inflate the numbers to create a better impression.

Both librarians wanted computers for their libraries, particularly for cataloging.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Romanian government had promised 25 computers to the school was encouraging, but considering the depressed Romanian economy, how soon will they arrive? Once they get the computers, will they have to connect to the Internet via dial-up? In comparing the December 31, 2003 World Factbook with the one dated April 21, 2005, Romanian Internet users jumped from 1 million in 2002 to 4 million in 2003. Because cities are going to get Internet access before villages, probably most

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of those new users live in cities; however, it does give hope for villages like Lunca Ilvei to eventually get connected. Anthony Acampora (2002) recommends using short-range infrared lasers to connect remote areas with the Internet because the technology is faster and cheaper than conventional underground fiber optic cable. After we returned to the United States I received an e-mail from one of our hosts, informing me that the village had just received mobile phone service (J. Ross, personal communication, August 14, 2004). If Lunca Ilvei residents can now use cell phones, can high-speed Internet be far behind? Will the villagers be able to afford the connection fee?

While interviewing villagers we inquired about their usage of the public library. A family of four generations, all of which were represented when we interviewed them, said they used the library frequently and wished it would acquire more books, particularly science fiction. One businesswoman checks out history books when she has time after managing her disco, bar, and general store. Most of the families told us they had to look elsewhere for practical information on topics such as medicine, agriculture, or automobile mechanics. A housewife told us she went to the mayor's office for information on agriculture. If she did not find it there, she had to go to the public library in Bistrița, some three hours away by train or bus.<sup>4</sup> Anghelescu (2000) observes that Romanian librarians have had a tendency to protect their books, and have not been noted for being patron-friendly. The mayor did tell us that he finds the library a low priority because there are so many other things that he feels are so much more important, such as paving roads. He suggested that people, if they need a book, should go buy it. But what if they do not have the money to do so? The great-grandmother of the four-generation family told us that under communism they had money, but nothing to buy. Now they have goods to buy, but no money.

According to Petru Popescu (1997), one reason Romanians suffered so much under Ceaușescu was because he placed a very high priority on canceling Romania's foreign debt. Doing so came at the expense of his own people, who were deprived of basic supplies, heat,

and food. Once his government was removed from power there was no one to step in and address the domestic economic problem. That, combined with corruption, inflation, and a worldwide recession, has prevented the country's economy from growing. Since the majority of Romania's libraries are publicly funded, how are they going to grow if government officials, like Lunca Ilvei's mayor, are more concerned with other facets of the government's infrastructure?

So what can be done for the libraries of not only Lunca Ilvei but also other Romanian villages? Some international organizations, such as the Soros Foundation, are currently helping some of the Romanian libraries and librarians (and other institutions and programs) with their needs, as well as encouraging them to network with libraries in other countries (Anghelescu, 2001). My team has taken a special interest in the Lunca Ilvei school library and is in the process of establishing an account with a Romanian bookstore so that the librarian may purchase books with money we provide.

Beyond that, however, the Romanians are going to have to do the majority of the work themselves, work that also addresses the economy. Government agencies need to get the economy under control, and then make more funds available for libraries. Jean and Peter Lanjouw (as cited in Schrieder et al, 2000) suggest that the rural non-farm sector, by providing employment for the rural labor force, plays an important role in improving the rural economy. For that reason they would applaud Lunca Ilvei's large wood mill, which employs almost 400 people and exports all over the world. Libraries need to work together to share expertise and ideas. Amery (n.d.) suggests that it is necessary to

*promote and adopt legislation for Romanian libraries, elaborate and adopt a statute for librarians, construct and put into action a national programme for the building of libraries, plan for the automation of the national library system, and help the professional organization of librarians (Legislation for Library and Information Services section).*

## Conclusion

In analyzing the libraries and information

infrastructure of Lunca, we found we had some unanswered questions about its libraries. Were we to return to the village, we would like to find out exactly how many books each library owns. Are the books in the school library age-appropriate? Why does the public library not carry “practical” books? Exactly how much library training does each librarian have, and why are they both secretaries as well as librarians? What government and international funds are available to help rural libraries?

The study of rural Romanian libraries is fascinating, made even more so by our personal visit to two of them. It is heartening to know that the public and school libraries are used by the villagers, but it would be even better to return and find the libraries filled with many more books and computers with Internet access. It would be great to hear that the villagers could go to the library for their practical information needs and not have to pay a visit to the mayor’s office or travel to Bistrița. If Romania can get its economy and domestic problems under control, perhaps some day it will come to pass. †

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Romanian Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand (1990), reported that two of his countrymen wanted a Bible so badly they were willing to shovel frozen earth all winter to earn what they hoped would be enough money to purchase one for their village.

<sup>2</sup> Angheliescu (in press), in her article on Romanian public libraries, states that with the exception of Internet access, library services are free of charge in Romania.

<sup>3</sup> Angheliescu (in press) states that each library catalogs every book from scratch, leading to a tremendous waste of time, energy, and human resources.

<sup>4</sup> I wonder if the mayor’s office provides agricultural material like the county agents do in the United States. That is a question that should be explored at another visit.