

OF BODIES AND DOCUMENTS: A REPORTAGE FROM A TRANSYLVANIAN VILLAGE

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*If I was to work again at all, it would be
necessary for me to come to terms with disorder.*
— Joan Didion, *Slouching towards Bethlehem*

Preamble

On 20 September 1993, in the village of Hădăreni, set in central Transylvania, a seemingly casual scuffle took a sudden tragic turn. An elderly man returning home with his horse and carriage noticed three young men talking to a girl in the bus stop. Assuming they were bothering the girl, the man admonished the youngsters, and when they replied rudely, he took out his horse whip to strike them. As the exchange became more heated, the old man's son, who was playing football with his friends on the nearby stadium, came to his father's defence. One of the three young men stabbed him and he died shortly afterwards.

The scene quickly escalated into what some would later call a 'pogrom'. The young men whom the elder admonished were Roma ethnics, while all the other participants — the elder, his son, and the girl waiting for the bus — were not. (Had the three young men also been Romanian ethnics, the old man would most likely not have been bothered that they were talking to a girl in the first place.) The Orthodox priest allowed a couple of men — whom he later said he had not seen before in church — to sound the church bells, so that villagers would gather in the village centre. Upon hearing that the old man's son had been stabbed by 'Gypsies', a large crowd of non-Roma locals armed with bats and torches quickly assembled and pursued the three Roma men. These sought refuge in a nearby house, which the crowd set on fire. The few policemen who had meanwhile arrived at the scene promised the three men protection in exchange for their surrender, so that two of the men inside the house came out, but they were seized and lynched by the crowd. (There is no agreed-upon version whether the policemen could not, or would not prevent this act.) The third Roma man burned to death inside the house.

The mob then set ablaze a dozen households belonging to Roma families, who ran for their lives to nearby forests and hills. After the riot, locals did not allow the family of the three Roma victims to bury their dead in the village cemetery. Their funeral took place in another village, where the family had come from a few decades before, and was attended by members of the incipient Roma-rights movement, who also organised rallies in nearby towns to denounce antigypsyism. (One prominent activist told me in an interview how disappointed he was when it turned out that many of the rank and file Roma ethnics present at the rallies had been enticed to participate not by the cause as such, but by local leaders' promises of 'aid'.) A few days after the conflict, the mayor of Hădăreni assembled the villagers on the stadium and praised their civic spirit. Despite a popular theory claiming that tensions, once aired, would dissipate, some non-Roma villagers in fact persevered in their vigilantism, and kept attacking those Roma locals who wanted to return to their houses. Riot police were stationed in the village for weeks on end.

The family of the three victims left the village forever; the people who had lost their houses to the fires spent weeks or months away from their homes, fearful to return, and devastated by their losses. The authorities discouraged them from filing complaints by hinting at their own (usually petty) criminal records, and the initial court hearings persisted in blaming the conflict on the 'lifestyle' of the Roma. State institutions remained slow to provide compensations or give out sentences to the perpetrators. It was only one year after the conflict that a handful of suspects were trialled, and the process lingered for three years; eventually, those found guilty only served reduced sentences. The requests made by the Roma to be compensated for their plight and the losses they had incurred were largely thwarted by the state. In the face of the judiciary's hostility, human-rights NGOs supported (and sometimes encouraged) the victims' demand for justice, and alerted international bodies, which then pressured the government to take measures.

'Justice delayed is justice denied': at the end of those years, most of the litigants felt they had received neither justice nor reparations. Activists then took the case to the European Court of Human Rights, which in 2005 ruled against Romania and mediated a friendly agreement between the state and the plaintiffs. The agreement took the shape of a community development programme which went on for several years and cost about one million euro, after which it inexplicably stalled. A few of the Roma locals/victims, aided by NGOs, continued to press for compensations. In the summer of 2012, the National Agency for the Roma, a governmental body, mandated the NGO I was working for to evaluate the programme, so I was sent to the village together with a few colleagues, in order to assess the intervention and write a report.

A Sense of Incompleteness

As soon as we arrived in Hădăreni, my colleagues and I were overwhelmed by the injustices recounted by Roma locals and by their advocates; to our novice ears, they sounded obscenely absurd, but, for better or worse, the evaluation report we wrote could not accommodate the emotional complexities of the case (its subchapters are titled, rather drily: 'Relevance', 'Efficacy', 'Efficiency', 'Sustainability', and 'Institutional Impact').¹ What's more, the document also failed to produce any concrete results, despite the indignation we poured on every page: to my knowledge, no further reparations have been attempted ever since, although the locals continued to reclaim them.

The next year, in 2013, I returned to Hădăreni as an independent researcher, seeking to add academic depth (and distance) to my formerly activist understanding of the case. The arguments I made then — that the intervention had fabricated its own truth, and that the register of victimhood epitomized by this intervention was inherently incommensurate and became a liability in the process of justice-making² — still felt incomplete. I then set about to write a reportage: this one.

While writing, it became clear that my sense of incompleteness owed to how I had avoided examining my own stakes in returning to Hădăreni after my stint in civil society. What was I trying to understand, and, perhaps more importantly, what was I trying not to understand? Was it my increasing uneasiness with notions like 'truth', 'justice', or 'doing the right thing'? Or my sense of inadequacy in the identities I tried to inhabit at the time — activist and/or scholar? Or, more broadly, was it an ambivalence towards my civic coming of age, against the background of the general disorientation that ensued after the regime change in 1989 and caused the people who lynched their fellow villagers and set their houses on fire back in 1993 to think they were building a better world — 'doing what had to be done', as they

put it. Essentially, telling the story of Hădăreni was an occasion for me to reflect on how our civic values, our notions of ‘a good society’ have been shaped, and how we practice them.

The narrative register allows me to confront these questions without the protective shield of scholarly arguments or of activist claims. The literary convention that this piece emulates is that of the non-fiction novel(la) perfected by authors associated with New Journalism, who convincingly stuck the label ‘creative’ onto works of nonfiction. This is both a personal preference, and a suitable approach to convey truths as subjective and fragmented as those that I recount here, in a voice explicitly devoid of any claims to infallibility (factual or moral). Some readers may see this as defeatism — narration as a form of running away from the responsibility of drawing conclusions — and they may be right. But after rewriting this story in three different ways, it seems more daunting to confront the loose ends as they are, than to tie them up in an uneasy knot. In the same vein, readers of an earlier version have signalled a certain ‘lack of empathy’ to it; inasmuch as this impression persists, I should clarify that it is deliberate: like ‘truth’ or ‘justice’, ‘empathy’ is a theme I examine, not a sentiment I revel in.

Lastly, and most importantly, this narrative register allows the people I worked with to speak for themselves, without any need for me to frame their words into scholarly arguments or activist indignation. As such, this genre also allows me to convey my gratitude to the people of Hădăreni who welcomed me in their midst (even after I discarded the activist cloak and the elusive promises it stood for), and to express my admiration for the matter-of-factness with which they reconstructed their lives (and their houses) despite the painful and unjust events that turned them into ‘a case’.

Jobs and Creeds

The evaluation of the ‘Hădăreni programme’ was my last research stint in the service of a Roma NGO in Bucharest, which I was assigned after I announced I was quitting my job. I was intrigued by the case, but I was starting my MA in Hungary a few weeks later, so I hesitated whether to go or not. My (former?) boss made it sound like he was doing me one last favour: ‘I know how much you like field trips’, he said, so I went along, partly out of curiosity and partly because I was keen to live up to his expectations (a profitable inclination to look for in employees).

Prior to this assignment, I had only heard about the conflict by chance, several months before, as I happened to drive through Hădăreni with a colleague who told me she had been there back in 1993, just days after the conflict. In passing, the village looked unremarkable to me, not unlike other villages and small towns curled between the gentle hills along the road connecting Târgu Mureş, the county residence, to Cluj-Napoca, the largest city in the region. It had the same elongated peasant homes, many recently refurbished or extended to reflect the prosperity generated by migration. It had the same type of community centre one finds in the middle of all such villages, painted in bright orange or lime green, along with a greyish monument for one of the two World Wars inscribed with the names of local soldiers. It even had the inevitable one or two large, recently restored churches belonging to the different faiths in Transylvania — a region that belonged to Hungary up until the Treaty of Versailles of 1920, and that still boasts a diversity of ethnicities and religions.

Gazing at this innocuous dreamy landscape, my colleague suddenly remembered she had been there before. As she recalled being struck by the smell of burn and the hatred in the locals’ eyes back in 1993, she confessed that, while hesitating about her calling before, this experience made her dedicate her

life to the promotion of Roma rights. Her sense of conviction sat awkwardly with my sense of confusion about the movement I was preparing to leave. If this event was so important — and as I learned later, some organisations called ‘the Hădăreni case’ a turning point for the Roma-rights world — why was I only learning about it merely by apropos? Most of my colleagues in the NGO knew nothing of it either, and our boss just said it was an unrepresentative case. But what was it ‘unrepresentative’ of? How could Hădăreni be at once ‘a turning point’ and so inconspicuous in the everyday concerns of the Roma movement? What did I really know about the values and the founding myths of the movement I considered myself part of, and, further, about the country in which I had grown up?

Back in September 1993, when my colleague was forming her activist beliefs, I was starting third grade. I clearly remember I was enthralled with a series of popular novels that I picked up from my parents’ nightstand, which depicted the brutal exploits of a German regiment in the Second World War. The novels made it sound like a picaresque adventure, and nobody told me otherwise. I also don’t recall anybody telling me that less than 400 kilometres away some people, villagers and workers like ourselves, suddenly took to lynching their Roma neighbours. It would have been a surprising fact: our neighbours were also Roma, and I went daily to their house when I felt bored at ours. Supposedly the adults around didn’t quite know what to think themselves.

Freedom and Confusion

Back in 1993, the story of ‘the Hădăreni pogrom’ received consistent coverage in foreign media, partly due to human rights organizations’ lobbying, and partly, I suspect, because to external observers it seemed to follow naturally after the flow of violent events that had been transpiring out of Romania since the 1989 regime change: the live execution of the Ceaușescus, the bloody clashes between Romanians and Hungarians in March 1990 in Târgu Mureș and between miners and students in June 1990 in Bucharest, the discovery of derelict orphanages where abandoned children had been kept in appalling conditions, et cetera. Foreign media at the time chose to account for these events as inevitable gaffes in the transition from dictatorship to democracy and rule of law. My sense is now that they were more deliberate than that — not exactly intentional, but also not the results of an absent or maladroit governance: they were symptoms of a certain ‘illiberal’ approach to governance and society that in the meantime has subsided, but has not entirely disappeared.

This assumption that the country found itself a ‘state of nature’ after the regime change transpires, for instance, from two lengthy reports about Hădăreni published in *The New York Times*³ and *The Independent*,⁴ respectively. Both emphasize the visceral violence of the conflict, inflicted by a mob of bellicose peasants upon a vulnerable minority, in an institutional void: they depict a lawless place if there ever was one.

The *Independent* article opens with a quote from a villager who clarifies they were all ‘stone-cold sober’ on the night of the conflict and ‘determined to do what had to be done’; no misunderstandings here. The text quotes the locals’ explanations for the events at length, most of them chillingly unrepentant, which the author says are reminiscent of ‘neo-Nazi extremists’ or ‘lifted straight out of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*’. These views, the author offers, gained ground in post-socialism, in the context of ethnically-divided Transylvania, adding the authorities’ neglect of what locals insistently denounced as ‘Gypsy crime’, the large number of Roma who lost their jobs after socialism, and the failure of the authorities to punish previous cases of anti-Gypsy violence. (In the absence of official statistics, I offer

the figure put forth by activists, who count around 30 such instances in the first one and a half decades after 1990; most of them entailed setting the Roma's houses on fire and chasing them out of the village – lynching remained unique to Hădăreni.)

The article in the *New York Times* similarly suggests that the conflict and the legal malversations that followed were caused by wide-spread 'resentment' towards 'Gypsies', which had been repressed under communism. It is debatable whether hostility towards ethnic minorities had really been repressed until 1989 — some of its means of expression, such as pogroms, certainly were — but the point of the two articles is that the conflict essentially amounts to a misunderstanding among locals and elites alike of what 'freedom' and 'democracy' meant.

Other voices, however, were less adamant that the episode had been an outburst of irrational violence; one of them is that of István Haller, a lawyer with the Târgu Mureş-based human rights NGO 'Pro Europa League' that assisted the plaintiffs from Hădăreni in their repeated attempts to obtain reparations and justice after the conflict.⁵ In the interview he granted me, he suggested that the conflict had been less spontaneous than it was generally assumed, and that some of the locals had prepared it under the influence of a nationalist organization called the 'Romanian Hearth Union' (*Vatra Românească*), with dubious entanglements in key state institutions, especially Intelligence. The organisation, he argued, had been touring Transylvania and promoting ethnic purification and supremacy — with Hungarians as their prime targets, and Roma as collateral damage. The 'Hearth' had been established in early 1990 in Târgu Mureş by an uncanny coalition of former secret service personnel and local humanist intellectuals united by a nationalist agenda, with the ostensive purpose of protecting Romanian culture and interests, which they thought were endangered by the rights granted to national minorities by democratic reforms. At a rally they organised in Hădăreni a few weeks before the conflict, upon hearing that a crime had recently taken place there between two Roma families, 'Hearth' representatives called upon the locals to take example from other places across the country where the Roma had been driven out of their villages. Following this call to action, some enterprising men in the village stacked torches, forks, and axes in an annex of the village pub, waiting until an occasion to do 'what had to be done' would present itself.

When it did, pundits and authorities rushed to classify it as a spontaneous outbreak of an irrational mob, an almost inevitable by-product of regime change and democratization. However, on closer inspection of the motivations, the preparations, and the consequences of the conflict, it seems to me that this was not lawlessness, but the law itself; not an absence of governance, but a way of governing. Crimes against 'Gypsies' could be committed with impunity not because institutions simply did not work, but because they worked in contempt of human rights. Not only had no official ever distanced themselves from similar actions or from the messages of the 'Hearth' but, both before and after Hădăreni, most institutions, as well as public opinion, quietly condoned (and occasionally endorsed) various eruptions of bigotry, while the judiciary, reportedly under political pressure, did its utmost to delay punishments for the perpetrators, and compensations for the victims. At times it looked as if they would have preferred to compensate the perpetrators, and punish the victims.

Silence

While outsiders only come to Hădăreni to inquire into the conflict and its aftermath, most villagers would go to great lengths to avoid the subject. Some locals whom I tried to interview offered in passing

that they did not want to talk about it because the intervention had only made the Roma 'more entitled than ever'. The man who had been mayor at the time of the conflict also refused to talk about it: he bluntly told me through his closed gate that he was done with the subject. The current mayor agreed to be interviewed but tactfully sought to change the subject, insisting that the villagers hoped to stop being seen as 'a dark spot on the map of Europe', and that Hădăreni was now becoming a European village with the money granted by the government after the conflict. Other locals confessed they felt 'ashamed' when they caught an occasional ride from elsewhere in the county and people asked them if they were still at each other's throats in Hădăreni. And a few Romanian ethnics to whom I talked told me jokingly that they could not remember whether they had taken part in the events in 1993. A policeman who had been present during the violence in 1993 and whom I interviewed also professed a certain amount of confusion: 'Back then we were like newly hatched chickens', he stated candidly. Since lynching was still a crime back then, what he meant was that in 1993 he had to guess whether he would be penalized for standing by while the locals did 'what had to be done', or for stopping them. (Given that he kept his job afterwards, it seems his guess had been right.)

My colleagues and I were struck by the naïve, careless impunity with which non-Roma locals talked about the conflict. In parallel, we were interviewing human rights experts involved in the case and collecting narratives from local Roma who were eager to testify to their suffering and their burned houses that had never been properly restored. Among this choir of conflicting voices, tensions ran high inside our team. On our last night there, as we were having dinner in a nearby town, one of my Roma colleagues erupted angrily that she could hardly share a table with non-Roma after all the stories of ethnic hatred that she had heard. I shared her fatigue and partly her indignation, and we all ate in silence.

Emotions versus Documents

In April 2013, during my MA, I sought to return to the village on my own. My former boss said he saw no point in me continuing my research about Hădăreni but conceded that I might have been 'impressed' by the case since I was young and I 'reasoned with my heart'. On a more pragmatic note, he urged me not to use the name of his NGO when I was there. As I prepared for the trip, I called a hostel located in a town close to Hădăreni where I had stayed with my colleagues the previous summer, and a hesitant owner told me they were fully booked (which I found hard to believe, as the area is hardly touristic). I had kept the number of Ileana, a Roma woman from Hădăreni, since my previous trip, so I called her.

It was Ileana's daughter-in-law who answered the mobile, and she told me Ileana wasn't home. I said I would be coming to Hădăreni, and she replied that more people would be coming from Bucharest in the coming days so I should make sure to remind them that Ileana's house had still not been rebuilt. She urged me to call later when Ileana would be home.

The second time I called, Ileana picked up and recognized me immediately. She asked whether we had sent our report 'to Strasbourg' — she meant to the European Courts of Human Rights, whose headquarters are in Strasbourg (the Roma involved in the case would often use the names of these institutions in abbreviated form: 'call Strasbourg', 'write to Human Rights'). I confirmed that it had been sent somewhere (I had no idea whether it had ever been meant to be sent to Strasbourg) and added that I no longer worked with any NGO, but was now a student. Then I told her I would like to

visit the village again, and she offered to host me. Other household members who joined in our conversation via the speakerphone wanted to know if anything had been done for their houses. I said that we sent our report to the relevant institutions, and clarified once again that I no longer worked for the NGO. My interlocutors reiterated their invitation to host me and ensured me that my ‘documents’ would be safe there; I insisted I had no ‘documents’ whatsoever. Ileana told me that since my previous visit, her husband had suffered a stroke and became paralyzed, and that her daughter had left for Germany, leaving her son in Ileana’s care. ‘Do come over, we need you dearly’, she concluded. I was left wondering whether she hoped I would be of some practical help with some ‘documents’, or she was being ironic. Either of these prospects made me uneasy.

That same day, one of my former colleagues from the NGO called me to say that a few Roma from Hădăreni had just filed a complaint with the National Council for Combating Discrimination signalling that their houses had not been rebuilt because of discrimination. The Council wanted a viewpoint from the NGO I used to work for, and my former boss wanted me to write the ‘documentation’ for this viewpoint. I loudly stated my surprise that Hădăreni was no longer a merely sentimental issue for him, but one of urgent legality, but even so I could not write anything as I’d be travelling to the village. My former boss offered that it would not be necessary for me to do any field research, so I had to remind him too, like I reminded Ileana, that this time I was not doing research for the NGO. The louder ‘positionality’ bells rang in my ears, the more everyone else seemed to ignore the matter.

Before going to Hădăreni I also contacted some governmental offices that had had some connection with the intervention. Most of the people who picked up their phones kept distancing themselves from the case, although they were clearly familiar with it; it took some wandering through the institutional maze before I found someone willing to talk. The one clerk who agreed to meet me started the discussion by expressing his disapproval of the activists’ interventions — they’re always too emotional, he said, and not nearly pragmatic enough. For instance, the reparations for the remaining house were being delayed because their property papers were not in order; if NGOs wanted to make themselves useful, he added, they might as well help the locals with these papers. As far as the government was concerned, there was enough money and good will for the reconstruction, but nothing could be done without documents. With the air he had reached a *q.e.d.*, he stood up to leave. By way of farewell advised me not to get too emotional about it all — a recommendation eerily similar (and similarly unsolicited) to the one my former boss had given me.

Arriving in Hădăreni

The next day I left Bucharest for Hădăreni. I arrived late at night and found Ileana waiting for me together with the parents of her son’s wife, Mariana and Tudor. They showed me into the house, to a room where Ileana’s husband was lying down in bed, immobile. Next to him, Ileana’s eight-year-old grandson was sound asleep. We sat on the bed and on chairs, Ileana made coffee, and we started chatting. To get the conversation going, my hosts brought up the names of a few activists from Bucharest whom they had been in contact with, and asked how they were doing, as if politely inquiring about members of my family. I used the occasion to stress once more that I was no longer affiliated with any NGO, hence I was not in touch with any of the people they mentioned. I also clarified again that I would not contribute to any ‘reports’ or ‘documents’ but would only write a paper for my university. Indifferent to the identity conundrum I had just exposed, Ileana exclaimed that she forgot to bring along her sister’s documents to show me. I reassured her that, with her permission to stay, I

would still be around for a while, and reiterated that I had no knowledge about any ‘documents’ whatsoever. My hosts seemed to take my statement as modesty and continued to talk about their past and present suffering, assuming that was why I had come. I did not know why I had come, so I neither encouraged nor stopped them. The discussion took its own course.

Now that I was there, Ileana said, I could go and talk to the mayor to get their property documents in order; she said she’d been going to the town hall and crying — ‘crying’ sounded like part of the standard way of interacting with authorities, as casual as filing a petition — and threatening to ‘call the Discrimination [the National Council for Combating Discrimination]’ or ‘write to Strasbourg [European Court of Human Rights]’. She rarely got to do it, because the clerks at the post office sabotaged her attempts to reach the outside world, so she would also have to complain about the clerks in her letter or fax, but if her letters and calls never got through?! Anyway the mayor was ultimately a good man, and she did not want to harm him. In his turn, when I went to inquire into the property documents, the mayor gave me a winded explanation of why it was not possible for him to finalise them, and summarised his predicament by confessing that ‘[Ileana] comes here and cries, so you have to help her, what can you do?’

When the voices fell silent, Ileana made a helpless gesture towards her husband, who in the meantime had fallen asleep. ‘This is what it all lead to, dear miss, sick people. None of us remained wholesome since the fires.’ ‘The fires’ is how the locals referred to what the government called ‘conflict’, and activists called ‘pogrom’: the violent events in September 1993. ‘But there is justice’, she went on, ‘because those who set the Gypsies’ houses on fire are also sick or dead by now. God isn’t sleeping’. Although their everyday speech was peppered with legal references, people’s idea of ‘justice’ was thoroughly divine. In my interviews, they dwelled less on the monetary compensations they had received (or not) from earthly courts, and more on the divine punishments impaired to the people who had harmed them: a prosecutor who had been hostile to them was blinded in an accident, one of the arsonists lost his wife and daughter to a disease, a hostile neighbour died a terrible death, and so on. With all its errors and inherent limitations, the governmental and activist intervention seemed only an inept interference into a matter which God alone was able to sort out.

After another moment of silence, Mariana asked about other kinds of money or assistance that they might be able to get: what about this new agricultural subvention, for instance, her smile a mixture of boldness and embarrassment. I declined any knowledge once again. I hoped I had clarified to my hosts that my presence was rather useless in the way of assisting them in any practical matters, but they chose to think I was tired and urged me to get some rest, so that I could get everyone’s ‘declarations’ the following day.

In the small hours of the morning, they showed me to another house in the same courtyard, where they would host me. It was a relatively new and ambitious two-storey building with a large balcony, fully furnished and endowed with brand new appliances. Next to it, I vaguely distinguished the structure of another house, also two stories high, consisting mostly of the resistance pillars and walls. Ileana, together with her husband and their grandson, lived in the small, two-room house where we had sat talking. After she helped me settle in, she made her way back there and left me in the big empty house, with its faux leather armchairs still wrapped in plastic.

Documents of the Body

On the second day, as soon as I woke up, I found that Ileana's sister had come to visit us from her neighbouring village. She asked me whether there was going to be 'a file', i.e. a new lawsuit, and said she did not want to be 'left out' like before. I told her I knew nothing of lawsuits; nonetheless, she offered a few details pertaining to my supposed administrative gaze: she was the legal successor of her late brother, Iancu, whom she had looked after in the last years of his life; prior to 'the fires', she recited, Iancu had been trading sheep to Syrians, even during communism, so that, when his house burned, he was a rich man; apart from money, there were also hundreds of sheep skins in the house when it burned, for which he had never been repaid; moreover, after 'the fires', it was she who gave him three thousand Deutsche Mark to set up an association 'so that he could take care of things'. She then realised that she had forgotten to bring along 'the documents', so as to prove that she's not lying, but urged me to visit her some day and take a look at them.

Ileana could barely wait for us to finish talking. 'They're making the file for the minors' suffering now', she informed her sister (and me), and urged me join her to the marketplace in a nearby town, so that I could get the 'declaration' of one of her daughters, who was 12 at the time of 'the fires'. She grabbed a large carton folder from a wardrobe and stuffed it in her bag, then asked her sister to take care of the household while we were away.

On the way to the market, I asked what 'the minors' suffering' meant, and Ileana told me she had heard there would be a new lawsuit, demanding compensations for the 'stress' that the children endured during the fires and in their aftermath. This was only right, she reckoned, because the children also 'ate a lot of fear and shame' and developed various ailments or could no longer attend school (out of shame, or because their parents were afraid to let them among non-Roma). This is why we were going to interview her daughter, Angela.

We found Angela selling second-hand shoes in an open-air market. Ileana told her I was there 'for the children's suffering' and prompted her to tell me about 'the fires'. Although we had barely met, in between haggling with picky buyers, Angela obliged: At the time of the conflict, she and her siblings were home alone, their parents off to their commercial activities. When neighbours set fire to their house, the children ran away and hid inside an abandoned mill outside the village; 'the rats there were as big as cats', Ileana said, then told Angela to talk to me 'about the trauma'. Angela uttered short sentences: 'yes, we had to run away', 'we hid in the mill', 'it was a great trauma – I got ill and had to get operated on'. 'Some people say hers disease was older', said Ileana, 'but there are documents [to prove it]'.

Later when we got home, Angela called and said she had been ashamed to talk about it in detail at the market, but we should meet another time. Ileana told me that before her daughters got married, they threw away some of the 'documents' that proved their disease into the open toilet at the back of the courtyard, so that nobody would know about it. 'They were ashamed', Ileana confirmed, 'because other people don't know what was here. If you had a faint heart you would've died'.

Ileana could still recount the costs of all the surgeries and treatments for her daughters, in the thousands of euro, just as she recounted the costs of the materials she bought to reconstruct her house. She loaned money from loan sharks and worked hard to pay back the huge interest rates, for fear these might hurt her children. She was hoping that at least some of these expenses, all of them

incurred because of ‘the fires’, would be paid back to her in court, and she put her trust in fifteen years-old receipts which proved that she was not lying, as she kept telling me.

Documents of the House

From time to time, Ileana took out this bundle of papers from the depths of the furniture, to inventorize its contents with me: it contained receipts for materials she used to rebuild the burned house, pages from the ECHR decision on the case, the registration of her brother’s association, medical prescriptions, crumpled family photos on the back of which she had hurriedly jotted down phone numbers of activists from Bucharest, handwritten affidavits, and flattened medicine packaging — disjointed metonymies of everything that ensued after ‘the fires’. ‘It’s all here, so that you know I’m not lying, dear miss’, she would tell me. ‘But there is no justice and there is no God. Here are the papers, because I’m not lying, and I don’t need to lie. We slept here in the ruins, on heaps of grass’.

Ileana was upset that her old house had never been properly repaired. When the government eventually decided to rebuild it, the workers only built half of the height of the wall, then put a makeshift roof over it, and said the money was over — ‘could you live like that, in a one-metre high house?’ she asked me. Another villager told me that the reason she only had half a wall was because she asked the workers to build another room next to her old one. I did not ask her if this was true — mutual suspicions and denunciations were rife among the litigants. The back-and-forth between the locals, the NGOs defending their case, and the government, on whether there were three or four houses to be rebuilt, with Ileana’s half-wall at stake, had been going on for many years. Not even basic arithmetic — 3 or 4? — was basic anymore in Hădăreni.

Further attempts to claim compensations stalled when state officials saw that Ileana had a perfectly fine house in the same courtyard. This infuriated her: her son Cornel had built that on his own efforts. When other boys were playing football and going to school, he had gone along with his parents to buy and sell stuff, and thus he made his own money. He had hoped to bring his future wife into his new house, but when he got married to Maria, the daughter of Mariana and Tudor, the girl wanted to stay with her parents, so he moved in with them, a few streets away from his mother’s household, much to Ileana’s chagrin. His large, well-furnished house had never been inhabited.

Ileana showed me a copy of the handwritten complaint she and a few other locals had recently filed with the National Council for Combating Discrimination. The paper, titled ‘declaration’, contained a list of people who declared themselves discriminated against by the Romanian state. Her declaration read:

[she] likewise considers herself discriminated against, because in 2007 not even a single nail was hammered for her house that had been set ablaze. She was promised they would come to begin working at her house in 2008 but they didn’t show up to this day.

Later that autumn, the Council rejected the case, concluding it was not a matter of discrimination.

After she had rebuilt her old house at her own expense, and assisted her son in building his own, Ileana was hoping that some additional money would enable her to finish the house that she had started building for one of her daughters. She confessed she had only started building it because ‘the big Roma from Bucharest’ had reassured her that more money would come from a separate trial that reclaimed

compensations for ‘the minors’ suffering’. If she had known the money wouldn’t come, she wouldn’t have started it, she said. They could have at least helped her pay for the roof and the remaining walls, so that the rain would not destroy what she had already managed to build — ‘I wouldn’t even mention the windows or the furniture, because, when you come and hammer a nail, I also come and hammer a nail’. But the government did not bargain.

Meanwhile, the skeleton of the new house only served to store the household garbage that the chicken scratched through. From a distance, it was difficult to guess whether this large, empty structure was an unfinished future project, or a ruin left behind by ‘the fires’.

Stage Directions

My host insisted that I needed to talk to everyone, so that the other Roma would not accuse her of capitalizing on my presence. But, although I had a list of the names of the applicants in the case with the European Court of Human Rights, I had no idea who ‘everyone’ was, or where I could find them. I could only rely on previous interlocutors to point me to the new ones — a domino effect whose idiosyncrasies were part of what I had come to research. Most people directed me to their relatives, but others mentioned unrelated old people who were too sick to walk, saying I should talk to them because ‘nobody ever sees them’, and ‘they are also pitiful’. Others reprimanded them: ‘Never mind those, you tell her about your own family’.

Despite my clarifications, my interlocutors kept telling whoever asked that I was there ‘for the houses’. They certainly said so to the members of their family scattered throughout Europe whom they called to have them narrate to me their experience of the conflict. Over the phone, Mariana instructed her sister to be eloquent: *Da duma mišto la gažeaiā*, ‘Talk well to the [non-Roma] woman’, she insisted in Romani. Her sister obliged: she uttered a staccato of short sentences filled with administrative vocabulary, presumably for my convenience. I wrote down dutifully the rushed stories they told over the short conversations that pre-paid cards afforded us, and emphasized between the lines that I was not in a position to take any measures for their wellbeing. They registered my disengagement with indifference, as if they never really expected me to do much in the first place. After all, they had been in charge of their own wellbeing all along.

In the beginning of our conversations, people took care to be eloquent, and were distressed that they could not find the right words: ‘I used to talk so well’, one woman said, ‘that even people from Bucharest would cry, but now I forgot how to’. For two decades, they had learnt that only the right words — ‘declaration’, ‘trauma’, ‘suffering’ and the like — would impress external listeners. Legal vocabulary had even made its way into church service too. When I attended the Pentecostal sermon, people would ‘petition’ God, and ask him to ‘consider’ their plight and not forget ‘the cause of Hădăreni’. The same at the Orthodox service: on Palm Sunday, after reading about the raising of Lazarus (John 11: 1-44), the priest held a sermon scattered with unexpected administrative phrases: ‘this event [the raising of Lazarus] clouded the minds of the authorities’; the Pharisees ‘were losing their popularity’, and people erupted in ‘spontaneous [protest] movements’; ‘a high-level meeting was called’ in which it was agreed that ‘a terrorist should be hired to pierce Jesus and provoke him a haemorrhage’. I struggled with the suspicion that the priest only spoke like that because he knew I was there and he assumed I represented some administrative body. Or perhaps this legalistic parlance was

truly deeply entrenched into village parlance: the less the law was present, the more its ghost haunted the place.

There was in fact a variety of registers in which people expressed themselves. As soon as people got used to my presence, it became clear to me that the aggrieved personas that they had learned to perform for the sake of external witnesses failed to fully represent them. After they were done telling me about 'the fires', polite pronouns turned to familiar ones, and conversation topics shifted. After an intense interview with a woman who told me between tears that after her house had been burned down she slept for months in the pigsty with her three children, she livened up and consulted me about what colour of nail polish would match a dress she would be wearing at an upcoming wedding, using the occasion to guide me through her wardrobe full of occasion wear and high-heels. Others started to talk about the fast cars they owned and their shenanigans with the police due to speeding or driving without a licence. A man recounted his experience in prison, which he recalled as a form of adventurous socialization, when he was 'the boss' of everyone else. Another woman started talking about her sons, who were working abroad and seldom ever call her, which brought tears to her eyes. At other times, people I visited more than once gave me advice on finding a husband, cracked jokes, or asked me to drive them somewhere. Finally, a family asked me if I could help repair their cable tv or at least call the cable company to come and fix it, because the service centre personnel refused to come if they guessed from their voices that they might be Gypsies.

Then there was the mutual suspicion: each family debunked the claims they guessed I might have heard from others (they were all familiar with the story of Iancu, Ileana's late brother, who had not been able to reclaim the money that had burned down with his house: 'Which Gypsies keep their money in the house?', they would ask me). They all warned me that 'the Gypsies won't talk anymore because nothing ever gets done', and yet they did, if only just to indulge me. They also said it was only their house that hadn't been rebuilt and warned me that I should be sceptical about the others' claims. Ultimately, most people believed it was because of the others' lies and overstatements that the compensation money stopped coming: '[There have been] so many lies, and so much pretention', they would exclaim, referring to what they guessed the others might have told me. Truth was ultimately ensured with reference to God ('God knows I'm not lying'; 'I tell you the truth as I would before God'), but on their way to heaven, words were distorted by more terrestrial interests.

In the evenings I would sit in the courtyard with my host and her guests, overlooking the street and listening to music. One of their favourite songs, a recent hit in the area, repeated in its chorus that 'People are green with envy/ Because the Gypsies have a stove'.⁶ My host rejoiced: 'It's true, every word is true'. The chorus sang: 'Gas, gas on fire'. To me the song sounded macabre considering the recent history of the place, but Ileana seemed oblivious to it, and was lovingly watching her grandson improvise a cute dance to it.

A man passing by one evening as we were gathered in the courtyard asked Ileana who I was, and she replied jokingly: 'Oh, the lady came here from Bucharest to give money to the Gypsies'. We all burst out laughing.

Dismemberment

It would be impossible to obtain a clear image of the events that took place in Hădăreni in September 1993 by only relying on narratives. The decades that passed since the conflict rendered people's stories schematic and divergent, as memories of trauma usually are. What results is a picture drawn in thick brushwork, contours fading into each other, colours shaded, and yet with uncanny naturalistic details, as if painted by an early expressionist.

One of the most recurrent tropes in the people's narratives of what happened on the night of the conflict is the very graphic imagery of bodily torment —how one of the three Roma victims had his limbs ripped from his body before he was thrown back into the fire. Or: how Romanian assailants beat up an old Roma woman until they broke her back. Or: how even their animals were beaten. These claims were never taken up in investigations, and many are probably irrelevant to legal cases, but my interlocutors would dwell on them in detail. It is these scenes, more than the legal offenses, that stayed with me, and that gave me a chilling sense of the dehumanizing dimension of the conflict – it is this detail, and not the sheer numbers, that give it its 'pogrom' magnitude.

The locals' explanations for the conflict are divergent: some people claimed it all happened because of a crime that had taken place a few weeks before between two Roma families; although this did not concern the non-Roma, the other villagers still got worked up about it. Others whispered that the three Roma men who were murdered 'were not saints': they were all from the same family which had only recently moved into the village and they had made lots of enemies by borrowing money without paying back. Others stated that the non-Roma simply got angry because Roma were grazing their horses on their fields, and the police would not do anything about it. And others yet would just say 'an evil spirit entered people's heads'.

Their personal memories of the conflict and its aftermath were equally diverse, and more intimate than the stories of 'suffering' they had been trained to repeat to investigators in order to elicit reparations. A woman recalled that a few weeks after the conflict some Romanians beat up her old mother and broke her back. A man who had worked together with co-villagers in a factory nearby said he could not stand to go to work anymore, because people would tease him during their commute and tell him they would set them ('Gypsies') on fire again. Another man said he had lost his job at the same factory after he pressed charges against the attackers (against the authorities' 'recommendation' not to). A man said he had gotten over the conflict — he had rebuilt his house, he was now a prosperous migrant — but he was sorry he had lost his friends: non-Roma in the village that he used to work and drink with no longer greeted him after the conflict, as if after having had his house set on fire he had become a lesser human being.

These intimate grievances — seeing one's mother beaten, one's children terrified, losing jobs, friends, and social standing — could not be compensated. They are irreducibly intimate, as Ileana would often remind me: 'Suffering is in my body, you cannot feel it for me. Nobody else can feel it'. What people had hoped to be compensated for was the degrading treatment they had endured since their neighbours, colleagues, and friends decided to no longer treat them as fellow villagers, but as 'Gypsies'; what they wanted was to be reinstated as people. Our dialogues kept returning to their loss of social status, the 'shame' and 'fear' that they went through, the severance of societal ties.

It only later occurred to me that their compulsive preoccupation with their houses, and the very state of their houses, damaged and eternally unrepaired, or new and unfinished, epitomized this degraded

social standing that had occurred out of the blue, and their futile aspiration to mend it, for which they did not have the means, and which had not been their doing in the first place. As Ileana concluded,

I don't need any pretentions [anything extra], I only need the money I lost, but [state institutions] have always discriminated against us, because we're from Hădăreni and our houses were burnt down. My heart aches to think I lost so much in my entire life, without being guilty of anything. That's why I don't want to talk about this anymore.

As I left Hădăreni one sunny afternoon in late spring, the empty house structure in Ileana's courtyard rose behind me, an unsettling reminder that the line between past and future is arbitrary and volatile, much like the line between self and society, or between who we are and who we want to be.

Notes

¹ Ivasiuc, A., *et al.* 2012. "Raport de evaluare a Programului 'Hădăreni'", http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/rapoarte/Raport%20de%20evaluare%20a%20programului%20Hadareni_ro_en.pdf (accessed 2 December 2019).

² Chirițoiu, A., 2018. "Emotions and Procedures. Contradictions of Early Romani Activism in a Postconflict Intervention", in S. Beck and A. Ivasiuc (eds.), *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*. New York: Berghahn Books. 45-64.

³ Kamm, H., 1993. "Hadareni Journal; Death Is a Neighbor, and the Gypsies Are Terrified", *The New York Times*, 27 October, p. 4. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/27/world/hadareni-journal-death-is-a-neighbor-and-the-gypsies-are-terrified.html> (accessed 21 November 2019).

⁴ Bridge, A., 1993. "Romanians Vent Old Hatreds against Gypsies: The Villagers of Hadareni Are Defiant about Their Murder of 'Vermin'. Adrian Bridge reports", *The Independent*, 19 October. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/romanians-vent-old-hatreds-against-gypsies-the-villagers-of-hadareni-are-defiant-about-their-murder-1511734.html> (accessed 21 November 2019).

⁵ Haller, I., 2010. "The Mendacious Government: Implementation of the Romanian Pogrom Judgments", *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 1, 23–28.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=durF0Kkk4e8>.

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