

ABSTRACT

A Model of Disintegration

Social and Economic Transformation in Curteni in the 20th Century

According to folklorist Olga Nagy, one cannot speak of “the Hungarian village” in Transylvania, as differing historical circumstances have given rise to distinct village models. From her perspective Curteni (Mureş County) was a typical example of rapid socio-economic transformation, extreme urbanization, and disintegration.

When, beginning in 2014, the author of this volume, Zsolt Nagy, began conducting occasional ethnographic research in the village, and subsequently, between 2018 and 2022, spent nearly 1,300 days there as part of an extended, stationary fieldwork project, he had the opportunity to meet with Olga Nagy’s former informants and their descendants. Through this work, the cultural, social, and economic phenomena, as well as the patterns of change and processes that had distinguished Curteni from other rural settlements in Transylvania since the mid-twentieth century, became perceptible and tangible to him, even if unintentionally. It also became evident, that as a result of a kulak murder and other traumatic events associated with forced collectivization, Curteni had become a “traumatized” village that lost virtually everything during the dictatorship. This, in turn, rendered the settlement a bearer of an exceptionally extreme communal mentality and collective outlook, which had remained hidden from Olga Nagy. Moreover, her assertion that, during collectivization, the villagers were merely passive participants – victims and sufferers of forces beyond their control – can no longer be substantiated. Evidence suggests that her former informants employed a communication strategy characterized by conscious or instinctive silence, concealment, pretense, and obfuscation, indicating that they were not willing to disclose all aspects of particular issues.

The sudden loss of rights to land, livestock, and even human life – though experienced with varying intensity and to differing degrees – affected every member of the community and became a shared collective experience. The inhabitants were compelled to confront and mitigate external pressures together, while those they perceived as representatives of authority – including Olga Nagy – had to be collectively misled in certain respects. In this context, forms of collusion, cooperation, and the feigning of obedience and/or enthusiasm became necessary, alongside the concealment of fears, anxieties, and critical reflections. Consequently, as a journalist and researcher, Olga Nagy was able to document only a reality that remained partially known and insufficiently explored. During the 1950s, and even into the 1960s, her interpretations were shaped by the prevailing framework of party ideology and her professional “training” as a journalist, and were based on fragmentary and often distorted data made available to her. The deliberate falsification and manipulation of facts – such as production figures, registry records, and official reports – were characteristic of the majority of documents produced by state administration and party organizations. Given the limited engagement with primary sources and the incomplete application of source criticism, Olga Nagy may have arrived at inaccurate conclusions. For instance, she suggested that the residents

of Curteni, despite relatively lower wages and a sense of shame associated with the peasant way of life, voluntarily sought to leave the local collective farm in favor of employment in nearby urban factories, accepting the inconveniences of commuting or relocation. In reality, however, the nationalization of private property – including land – followed by forced collectivization and poorly conceived industrialization policies imposed by the authorities, created conditions in which individuals were effectively encouraged (or, more accurately, forced) to abandon their traditional way of life.

Over time, it likely became apparent to Olga Nagy that, although she could “enter any house, was welcomed, and people would chat with her she nevertheless failed to reach the desired depth of engagement with her interlocutors in Curteni. She later articulated her suspicions when she wrote: “The reader will be surprised that it is precisely here, in Curteni, that question marks loom before me, suggesting that something is very wrong... [...] I instinctively felt that something was amiss here. [...] Something is not right here. Why?”

This tense situation, however, was never resolved. Having arrived in Curteni as a journalist – a “mouthpiece of the regime,” a form of itinerant reporter operating within a controlled and manipulated framework – and, moreover, in the company of “trusted comrades,” she was unable to overcome the justified distrust and reserve of the villagers. These included the marginalized and intimidated individuals who provided information, as well as the ostensibly “enthusiastic” collectivist women and others. The asymmetrical power relations and constrained conditions of encounter persisted even during her later visits, when she returned as a researcher and retiree. Consequently, she was unable to achieve the same depth of understanding of the intimidated community and its social dynamics as she did in other field sites, such as the villages of Țara Călatei Inucu and Petrinzel, or Sic in the Câmpia Transilvaniei region (considered models of tradition), Neaua in the Valea Nirajului and Pănet in the Câmpia Mureșului (models of development), or Ilieni after the regime change, where even a brief period of fieldwork proved highly productive (a model of breakthrough oriented toward renewal). It is telling that in Curteni Olga Nagy was unable to collect so-called folk narratives, true stories, and tales in a quantity comparable to her other research locations. Rather than documenting the “byproducts of disintegration,” she sought to record a living folk culture in Curteni as well, albeit with limited success.

From the perspective afforded today, the situation can be assessed with greater clarity. Drawing on both documentary sources and his own fieldwork, the author of this volume, Zsolt Nagy, arrives at a firm conclusion: Olga Nagy, in her dual role as journalist and researcher in Curteni, was subject to manipulation on multiple levels. The history of collectivization was presented to her in a tabooed and distorted form; the locals repeatedly misinformed, misled and deceived her; and the sources available to her – statistics, reports, and various accounts – contained falsified data and retrospectively altered, unreliable information. The discrepancies of these materials did not always attract her attention. Patterns of silence, concealment, and tabooization are evident not only among those who suffered violence and trauma, but also among those who perpetrated it, most notably representatives of the state.

Until recently, little was known about Olga Nagy’s activities in Curteni – the former “showcase village” and model or “pilot collective,” of the Regiunea Mureș-Autonomă Maghiară – where she worked first as a journalist and later as a folklorist. The author, Zsolt Nagy, identified the only viable approach to uncovering and collecting relevant data as consisting in the systematic examination of

documents and collections of Olga Nagy – both unpublished and published – alongside an analysis of the settlement's representation in the press, the undertaking of supplementary ethnographic fieldwork, and the recording of recollections in the form of interviews. The classical historical and archival sources – despite repeated attempts to access them – have largely remained silent regarding the events discussed in this volume, such as the murder of kulaks and various forms of persecution. Internal party documents, classified court records, and official correspondence likewise provide only indirect evidence of the violence associated with the process of collectivization.

This volume seeks to offer a comprehensive account of what Olga Nagy encountered in the village from the 1950s onward. What materials did she collect, and by what methods? What did she publish on the basis of these materials, and how did she later reflect on her work in Curteni? Is the model of disintegration she defined even valid, and are her broader observations concerning Transylvanian villages accurate? Furthermore, how did the nationalization of estates and the forced collectivization of the village – both profoundly traumatic processes – together with the establishment of the dictatorship between 1948 and 1989, transform the society of Curteni and, more generally, that of Transylvanian Hungarian villages? How were these transformations accompanied by changes in lifestyle and mentality, and how did they continue to evolve in the years following the change of regime?

In this monograph, Zsolt Nagy seeks to situate Olga Nagy's former fieldwork, experiences, and findings in Curteni within a broader historical framework, based on the data uncovered to date. He utilizes and presents relevant archival sources in order to illustrate the socio-economic transformation of the settlement between 1948 and 2006, including its emergence as a showcase village, the imposition of a new Soviet-style social order, and the media representation of these developments. At the same time, he interprets Curteni as a model of disintegration. By "society" the author understands the totality of forms of human coexistence, a definition that encompasses not only the economic sphere but also the subsystems of politics and culture.

This representative text collection includes selected press documents concerning the village's transformation between 1948 and 2006, as well as Olga Nagy's newspaper articles written about Curteni, her previously unpublished collections, and other relevant published scholarly works. In addition, it includes several notable examples of the village's literary representation, along with a list of major news reports from the transitional period spanning more than a decade and a half following the regime change, up to 2006. The texts assembled in this extensive repository of 1,293 items mutually reinforce and elucidate one another, thereby enriching interpretation; they may be understood as individual puzzle pieces of a unified corpus. Together with the tables (3), images (170), and indexes (Index of Geographical and Personal Names) provided in the Appendix, they also serve to illustrate and substantiate the arguments presented in the introductory study. The volume concludes with abstracts in Romanian and English.