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Development and Decline in the Danube Excursion Development and Decline in the Danube Delta - REPORT

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Sfiștofca – The Dying Village

The individual fates of 13 persons, who were all members of the linguistic and religious minority of the Lipovans, are taken as examples to make an outside audience aware of death in their village. How they died is in no way dramatic; it happened slowly. The personal fates of its inhabitants can be transferred to that of the village of Sfiștofca itself.

Introduction

Sfiștofca is a dying village. The subject of death is addressed based on the fates of the inhabitants of Sfiștofca. Between 2010 and 2011, the author questioned 45 people living in Sfiștofca – a village that, at the time, had a population of 80. When he visited the village again in August 2015, he discovered that 13 of the people who had provided information on Sfiștofca had died; this means that around one third of those interviewed had passed away within a period of a five years. With these deaths, the village of Sfiștofca had lost almost 20% of its inhabitants. If dying continues at this pace, in two or three decades, the village will no longer be populated.

The inhabitants are gradually losing their linguistic and religious roots in the Russian Old Believers faith. Today, what was once strong has become weak. No new impulses make themselves felt. The activities of everyday life and festivities in the village are decreasing and could come to standstill. Events could be staged for a period and possibly attract non-resident supporters to the village. Especially at Easter and the annual celebration of the consecration of

the church, on 14 October, the village presents itself in its traditional fashion and one has the feeling of being transported back to a past age that was the norm 50 years ago.

Especially during the two summers of 2010 and 2011, which I spent with the Lipovans (Breiling C., 2012), I interviewed those who have since died and they told me about their lives in great detail. There were some surprises that do not necessarily fit into the established image of the Lipovans as a linguistic-cultural minority.

Sfiștofca's Dead

Overall, the depiction of the lives of the 13 deceased is a homage to valuable people whose memory is connected to the village of Sfiștofca and who have its cemetery as their last resting place. Their history can be traced far back to the days of the Russian tsarist empire when their persecution as a result of the schism in the Russian Orthodox Church led them to the Danube Delta. Today, they represent an important component of the Russian diaspora in the EU, which almost completely ignores this ethnic group.

Fyodor Sukov

Fyodor Sukov died in 2013 at 64 years of age. Fyodor lived alone in Sfiștofca up to his death. Fyodor had divorced his wife, with whom he had a daughter, many years before. After the divorce, Fyodor's wife and daughter emigrated to America.

Fyodor left school after he completed the sixth grade to help his parents at home. When he was 17 years old, Fyodor found work in the cement factory in Somova where he was awarded a premium as the best worker. When he stopped working at the cement factory, Fyodor moved to Teleorman and graduated from the school for professional drivers there. After completing his military service with the navy in Tulcea, he was employed as a driver for the hospital. Later, he worked as a sailor until the fall of Communism in the year 1989 and travelled as far as West Africa during this period. Fyodor later returned to Sfiștofca where he worked at a small farm until his death. Fyodor had heart problems and asthma. In his spare time, he liked to watch espionage and war films.

Fyodor, like his parents, was born in Sfiștofca. He separated from his wife while he was working as a driver and she brought up their daughter. Fyodor occasionally visited his wife and daughter but then did not see his daughter for 17 years until she visited her father in Sfiștofca in the year 2007.

Fyodor was not absolutely sure about where his ancestors came from. In his conversations with me, he frequently mentioned that they had been driven out of Russia during the reign of

Peter I. and settled on new land they found on the other side of the Danube. According to Fyodor, more than 1,000 people once lived in Sfiștofca but now there was hardly any work and many of the young people moved to the cities in search of employment. Fyodor did not have any relatives or acquaintances in the Ukraine.

When talking about Communism, Fyodor stated that he had lived very well under Ceausescu because he had a good job as a sailor. His work made it possible for Fyodor to travel and East Berlin was one of the places he visited. Fyodor said that things did not go well for him after the fall of Communism as he was unable to find work anywhere. As Fyodor saw it, accession to the EU was negative seeing that rich parliamentarians earned even more money after this while the poorer members of the population only profited minimally. When I asked him if he went to church, Fyodor's answer was: if he wanted to and could. Fyodor always attended services at Christmas and Easter. In former times, he had often renovated or repaired something in the church.

In the last years before his death, Fyodor no longer had any property of his own and lodged with a friend in Sfiștofca. His friend threw him out of the house after a quarrel and Fyodor then lived without possessions with several acquaintances in Sfiștofca. It would have been better if Fyodor, the former globetrotter, had been able to grow old surrounded by his family and spend the last days of his life together with his wife and daughter.

Nikifor Suvorov

Nikifor Suvorov died in 2014 at the age of 74. He lived with his wife Irina, with whom he had two sons and a daughter, in Sfiștofca until his death.

Nikita worked as a salesman throughout his life. He was sent into retirement in 1997 and then worked as a farmer and fisherman.

After finishing four years of primary education, Nikifor immediately found work as a salesman. In 1960, Nikifor went to Bucharest for his army service and then continued in his former field of work until his retirement.

Nikifor's parents were Igor Suvorov and Ekaterina Suvorova. They had three sons and three daughters. Nikifor's daughter and one of his sons live in Sulina; the second son lives in Bucharest.

When we discussed the history of the Old Believers, Nikifor stated that they had been driven out of Russia under Peter I. and could be found all over the world today. When they fled from Russia, many of the Old Believers settled in forests with many linden trees. According to

Nikifor, the name “Lipovan”, which is given to the Old Believers in many parts of south-eastern Europe, has its roots in the Russian word for linden “lipa”.

Nikifor also had connections to the Ukrainian Danube Delta. His aunt lived in Belgorod in the Ukraine and was married to a man called Romanov. He had been a priest in Primorskoje and one of his children had later been the relatively famous Officer Romanov. Nikifor wanted to visit this officer once when he was in Primorskoje but he did not find him at home.

When we discussed Communism, Nikifor stated that although people had money in those days there was very little that could be bought. Nikifor criticised that, in contrast, after the fall of Communism, there was enough to buy but people had no money. Their low pensions made this situation especially difficult for the elderly.

During the Communist days, Nikifor and his wife had visited Donetsk and Odessa in the Soviet Union. They had been given a Soviet visa that was valid for one and a half months. They were still in the USSR when the revolution broke out in Rumania.

Nikifor felt that many people had become rich at the expense of others while the major section of the population had remained poor in the post-revolution period. He also said that he had still been able to work after the change in spite of the economic crisis. Nikifor considered Romania’s membership in the EU positive as he believed that the other member states supported the country economically.

Nikifor said that he went to church on most Sundays and the main holidays. Sometimes this was not possible if he had to work with the cows.

Nikifor obviously had to be a very hard worker to be able to maintain his income in times of crisis. Nikifor lived together with his wife until he died. This was advantageous because his wife Irina always warned him when he had drunk too much alcohol. It is also interesting to note that Nikifor was in contact with his Ukrainian relatives and visited their country himself. This was different from many other people living in Sfiştofca who had no contact to their relatives across the border.

Kulina Wutilkin

Kulina Wutilkin was 95 years old when she died in the year 2015. Kulina had four daughters; three live in Sulina and one in Sfiştofca.

Kulina worked together with her husband on their small farm in Sfiştofca where they grew potatoes and other vegetables. The couple sold their agricultural products and could buy clothes from the profits. Kulina’s husband was an invalid when he returned from the war but he was a good worker and did not drink very much alcohol.

Kulina's husband died when he was 80 years of age and she lived alone in Sfiștofca after that. They married at the end of winter and the couple went to cut reeds together immediately after the wedding. Kulina and her husband were very industrious people who lived relatively well and did not have to ask anybody for help.

One of Kulina's sisters lived in Vilkovo in the Ukraine and, as a result, Kulina had a nephew there.

Kulina worked with horses during the Communist period. She was once kicked so hard by a horse that she became unconscious and fell down; after that, she was blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. When talking about her everyday life, Kulina told that she sits at home waiting for somebody to visit her. Kulina's daughter who lives in Sfiștofca visited her mother every day but Kulina essentially lived alone. She cooked her own food until she was over 90 and cleaned her room without help. However, Kulina had to hold onto furniture when she walked around the room. She often said that she waited in her room for God to call her.

Kulina went to church regularly when she was young but, at over 90 years of age, she could no longer manage to walk the distance.

It is interesting to note that Kulina went to cut reeds with her husband on their wedding day. Her high age shows that Kulina lived a very harmonious life.

Karp Sarajev

Karp Sarajev was 54 years old when he died in 2012. Karp was married and had a daughter and two sons. He was out of work until his death and hoped to receive support from the state. Sometimes he went fishing and took people out in his boat. He received a few lei for that but, all in all, it was almost too little to live on. Karp had to get up early to take care of his chickens.

Karp left school after the sixth class and worked as a tractor driver and fisherman. In addition, he collected reeds for roofs. Karp was a practical person who enjoyed his work. Karp's daughter lives in Letea with her husband while the elder son works in a fishing company in Sulina and the younger has moved to the Czech Republic in search of work.

Karp had relatives, including his godfather, in Vilkovo. He had a very positive attitude towards Communism because he had work at the time and everything moved forward. In comparison, Karp found the situation after the fall of the old regime worse; however, he frequently remarked that his life was not all that bad thereafter and that he did not have to fight to get a piece of bread. Karp recounted that it was very difficult to travel during the Communist period and that he had never been to the Ukraine himself. According to Karp, it

was only possible to enter the Ukraine via Galati in those days but that, with the change in government, it had become possible to go directly from Peripava across the Danube to Vilково by boat. Karp considered the European Union very positive and was of the opinion that the member states of the EU helped each other reciprocally.

When discussing the church and religious services, Karp told me that he liked to pray, was fond of the church and always attended service when he had enough time. Karp was a very friendly man who was full of life. It is very sad that his early death meant that he had to leave his wife and three children alone. Karp's opinion of the EU was also interesting; he saw Romania's membership as a chance for the country while most of the other people living in Sfiștofca were angry that corrupt Romanian politicians siphoned off EU money for their own purposes.

Maura Warnawitsch

Maura Warnawitsch was only 47 years of age when she passed away in 2014. She was married and the mother of a son. Maura was unemployed until her death. She hoped to receive social benefits from the state but did not get any financial support. Maura often complained that things were not going well for her family and herself.

Maura was born in Periprava and moved to Sfiștofca when she married. She did not finish her education because she could not understand anything she was taught at school. Maura had two brothers – one in Sulina and one in Ploiesti. The brother in Sulina was a pilot. Maura also had a sister who had drowned.

Maura had no connection to the Ukrainian section of the delta. Her father was Ukrainian but he had died many years ago. Maura had relatives in the Ukraine but she did not know if they were alive or not.

When discussing the situation in the Communist period, Maura simply stated that life was not easy for her at the time. Maura also said that everything had become even worse after Romania's accession to the EU.

Maura only went to church when she had enough money. She felt that it was necessary to buy and light a candle whenever she visited the church.

In general, Maura appeared to be very despondent. She cried a lot and had the feeling that things around her were worsening. The reason for this was probably that she and her unemployed husband and son, who was also out of work, had to live in very poor conditions in Sfiștofca. Maura was suffering from atrophy of the muscles and died as a result of this illness. It is likely that, at the end, Maura thought of death as the only way out of her misery.

Toma Atanasia

Toma Atanasia died in 2013 at the age of 60. Toma lived in Sfiştofca with his second wife until he passed away. He had three children with his first wife; they are all adults today and have their own families. Toma's second wife also had three children with her first husband. Toma lived in Sfiştofca where he went fishing, repaired fishnets and carried out repairs on his house. Toma was blind in one eye and therefore received a small allowance for handicapped persons. Toma had worked in the fish factory in Sulina until the change in the political system. He had owned a house there and lived in it for 25 years. After he lost his job in Sulina, Toma moved to Sfiştofca to farm a piece of land. This made it possible for him to live fairly well even though he was unemployed.

Toma attended the school in Letea for seven years and then moved to Sfiştofca, his first wife's hometown. The couple then went to Sulina and built a house there. After the revolution and death of his first wife, Toma returned to Letea and then moved on to Sfiştofca.

Toma sometimes mentioned that he and his children supported each other. His children live in various parts of Romania and when they visited him he gave them a few sacks of potatoes. Toma frequently stressed that his children had stayed in the country while many others had emigrated to America, Spain and Italy in the democratic age.

Toma had many relatives in the Ukraine and had visited them in 1980. At the time, he travelled over Izmail to Tatar Bunar where they lived. After seeing his relatives in Tatar Bunar, Toma also visited Odessa, Sevastopol and other cities, He had a visa for 45 days but left the Ukraine after 18 so as not to put any strain on his Ukrainian relatives' hospitality. The contacts between Toma and his relatives in the Ukraine gradually decreased after his visit in 1980.

When he spoke about Communism, Toma repeatedly stated that, in those days, people got up early, went to work and received a set salary at the end of the month. In addition, factories and apartment buildings were built under Ceausescu's regime so that everybody had a secure place to live and steady work. In his many discussions on the change in the political system with friends and relatives, Toma criticised that, in the age of democracy, some politicians in Bucharest had managed to syphon off large sums of money for their own purposes and that nobody showed any interest in the poor people in the country.

In our discussions on the EU, Toma said that the EU helped Romania and therefore Romania should help the EU in return. He also felt that it would be better to create sufficient workplaces in Romania than hope for aid from the EU.

Toma only went to church once a year. He criticised that people talked so loudly during the services that he was unable to hear what the priest was saying. Toma felt that it should be quiet in church and only the priest should speak.

When one visited Toma, one was always given a hearty welcome and he never forgot to invite his guests to try his home-brewed vodka. Some of the villagers bought vodka from Toma and this made it possible for him to have regular contact with many of the people living in Sfiştofca in spite of his peaceful, isolated way of life.

Zena Sepatkin

Zena Sepatkin lived alone in Sfiştofca until her death at the age of 61 in 2013. Zena had two sons; one son was born in Mila 23 as was Zena herself. When Zena moved to Sfiştofca after her marriage, she left her first son with her parents in Mila 23 and he grew up there. Zena's husband had six children from his first marriage and the couple had one son who presently lives in Sulina.

Zena worked as a day-care centre supervisor and fisher in Mila 23. She was 28 years old when she married her husband, who came from Sfiştofca; he was 47 at the time. Zena worked in her vegetable garden in Sfiştofca and also kept chickens until she passed away.

Zena attended school in Mila 23 for 8 years but had no further education after that. Zena was born in Old Kiliya and her father then moved to Mila 23 with the family. After her marriage, she moved to Sfiştofca and spent the rest of her life there. Zena saw her sons fairly often until she died. Sometimes her sons visited her in Sfiştofca and she also travelled to Mila 23 and Sulina to see them.

Zena's mother had a brother in the Ukraine who she was in contact with. Zena could not remember in which Ukrainian city her uncle lived.

Zena always had positive things to say about the Communist period as she lived well during those days. She kept pigs and from eighty to one hundred chickens. According to Zena, life became more difficult after the fall of Communism. After the change, Zena had a small garden and only a few chickens. The meal for the chickens had become very expensive after the Communist era and a sack cost between eighty and one hundred lei.

In regard to the European Union, Zena thought that everything had become more expensive and that the poor people had no money. A mafia with a great deal of money that could buy whatever they wanted had developed in the days of the EU and democracy. She felt that all

poor people could do was work in their vegetable gardens to grow potatoes, onions and the other food they needed.

Zena went to church regularly and was a member of the choir in Sfiștofca. The church and choir rehearsals provided Zena with welcome recreation. She had many old aunts in the choir and they all sang, cried and had fun together.

Zena enjoyed life. She loved travelling to Old Believer festivals throughout Romania where the choir from Sfiștofca sang Russian folksongs. After the choirs' performances, Zena frequently danced with other festival visitors to Russian and Romanian music.

Maria Pankratov

Maria Pankratov died in 2013 at the age of 74. She had four children. One son lives in Sfiștofca, two in Sulina and Maria's daughter lives in Tulcea. Maria stressed that life in Sfiștofca used to be a lot of fun when many people lived there and they all had work.

Maria was a housewife; her first husband was a fisherman and she married a second time after his death. Maria often mentioned that, in former times, there were large gardens, a lot of cows and sheep as well, in Sfiștofca. She regretted that the young people now had to go to the city in search of work and that there were very few young people and many old people who could no longer work in the village.

Maria attended the Russian school in Sfiștofca for four years. She had no further education because it was no longer free and her parents had a lot of children and not much money.

Maria was born in Sfiștofca as were her forebears. Maria's children usually only visited once a year because – in Maria's words – they were occupied at home with their own affairs.

Sometimes Maria visited her children but travelling had become more difficult as she grew older.

Maria did not know exactly when her ancestors had migrated to the Danube Delta but she told that Sfiștofca had been built by Russian immigrants around 200 years ago. Most of Maria's predecessors had lived from fishing that they carried out on the lake near Sfiștofca. After the church and huts had been erected, people began farming. Maria stated that Lipovans not only lived in Sfiștofca but also in Periprava on the Ukrainian side of the Danube.

Maria had many aunts and uncles in the Ukraine and, therefore, visited the country regularly until 1995. Maria was also in the Ukraine during the Ceausescu regime.

When we talked about life under Communism, Maria repeatedly stated that everybody had work in Ceausescu's days. According to Maria, people had splendid, large farms and were

paid for their work in those times. Maria explained that, after the change, there was plenty to buy but many people had no work and could not afford anything. Maria received a pension of 300 lei until her death. This made it possible for her to buy the medicine she needed but did not leave anything for other goods. In summer, Maria was able to live from the potatoes and tomatoes she grew in her garden but she had to buy them from the shops in winter and this cost a lot of money.

She said that she was not interested in the European Union and felt that politicians were bandits who told lies to the people.

Maria went to church regularly and knew a great deal about the holidays of the Old Believers. She was one of the few people in Sfiștofca who always had her large family around her. Maria's son Jakob and her five grandchildren lived in the house across the street. The grandchildren often visited Maria and their youthfulness and vitality kept her young. Maria taught her granddaughters Russian folksongs and her daughter-in-law also sang in the Sfiștofca choir.

Erimej Halkin

Erimej Halkin was 71 years old when he died in 2012. He had four daughters and worked as a fisherman. After he retired, Erimej had to have a leg amputated as a result of blood poisoning. Erimej was born in Sfiștofca and attended the village's Russian school for four years. Erimej had no further education after the primary school. He then worked at home before going to the army. After completing his service, Erimej started to work as a fisherman and he was active in this profession until his retirement. Two of Erimej's daughters live in Tulcea, one in Sulina and one in Sfiștofca. The daughter who lives in Sfiștofca took care of her ailing father until his death. The other daughters visited Sfiștofca regularly to help their sister with their father. Erimej had no connection to the Ukraine. Several times during our conversations, Erimej said that some things were good and others bad in Socialist days. Erimej had always been a fisherman and was never without work. He never travelled. Erimej also stated that things improved for him after the political change in Romania. Most of the people had work at first, were able to express their opinions openly and travel relatively freely. Later, many people were fired and, according to Erimej, it is rather difficult to find new employment today. Erimej had a positive opinion about the European Union. He explained that the other member states were helping Romania and that, as a result, the living conditions were continuously improving.

Erimej used to go to church regularly but this became impossible when he lost his leg.

After the amputation, Erimej was confined to a wheelchair and dependent of his daughter's care. His mobility was further impaired due to the difficulties of using a wheelchair on the sandy paths with many potholes in Sfiștofca.

Marco Sepatkin

Marco Sepatkin died at the age of 65 in 2011. He was married to Senovia Sepatkin until his death. Marco and his wife had two daughters; both are married. Marco worked as a fisherman in Sulina and Sfiștofca. After his retirement, Marco relaxed at home and did repair work on his house.

Marco was born in Sfiștofca in the year 1946 and attended the village's Russian school for 4 years. After the war, Marco did not have the possibility to continue his education and he began working as a fisherman when he was 18 years of age. Starting in 1969, Marco spent two years in the army and then returned to fishing until his retirement.

Marco's two daughters originally lived in Sulina but one migrated to Spain in search of work. Marco saw his daughters often while they were both in Sulina.

Marco felt that his life in the Communist period had been much the same as it was afterwards. He lived a simple life both before and after the change. Marco never travelled. He said that he had no relatives outside of the Romanian Danube Delta and had no idea where he should travel to. Marco was very critical of the European Union because he had observed that, following the country's accession, many people had lost their jobs and that the needy only received limited social benefits.

Marco went to church on Sundays and all holidays.

In contrast to his wife Senovia, who still directs the choir in Sfiștofca today and is head of the Lipovan Society in Sfiștofca, Marco led a relatively uneventful life. His wife travels with the Sfiștofca choir to Old Believer festivals throughout the country several times a year while Marco hardly ever left his home village and was also not often seen in public in Sfiștofca. All in all, Marco was a very quiet and pleasant person who accepted things as they were and did not think too much about the life going on around him.

Anna Shigarov

Anna Shigarov died at the age of 90 in 2012. Anna lived alone in Sfiștofca until her death.

She gave birth to ten children but only three sons and a daughter survived.

Anna used to work on the farm together with her husband. They had pastures, cows, horses and as many as 100 chickens. Anna gave up the farm after her husband's death because she

was unable to manage the work by herself. Anna stated that her husband had always said that he would outlive his wife but he was the first to die. Anna felt that the reason for this was that he was homesick for her and did not want to stay in hospital when he was ill.

Anna liked to watch television in her leisure time. The antenna, which made it possible for her receive up to 100 programmes in Russian and Romanian, was rather expensive but Anna was prepared to pay the price for her entertainment.

Anna was born in Sfiştofca and never went to school. She had eight siblings; her father died at an early age and her mother needed the children's help on the farm. The children took care of the cows and worked in the garden. Anna married a merchant from Sfiştofca in the year 1945. Anna's husband was relatively well-off; he had a shop in Sfiştofca and another one in Sulina. Anna's daughter and two sons live in Sulina while the third son has his home in Tulcea. Her sons only visited Anna rarely but her daughter came often to talk to her mother and check that everything was in order in the house. Anna's brother and sisters died during her lifetime.

Anna had a brother who lived on the same street; he had a lovely home and many children. Her brother's youngest son died from an electric shock.

Anna frequently told that her predecessors came from Chabarovsk and had worked there as fishermen. Anna's cousin from Chabarovsk visited her a few years ago. Anna was asked to return the visit but said she felt that the journey was much too long. She seemed to be happy that her forefathers had moved to the Danube Delta from Chabarovsk and sometimes said that they had received a good education in Romania. Anna's daughter spoke Romanian well and attended a school. Her daughter's daughter had learned about ten languages and was leading a good life in Ankara.

In addition to the cousin in Chabarovsk, Anna had many relatives in Vilkovo in the Ukraine. Anna's sister lived in Vilkovo and had several children. Anna was visited by her niece with her husband and children several years ago. Anna used to travel frequently to the Ukraine and once took the bus from Vilkovo to Odessa.

When we discussed the Socialist period, Anna said that it was same then as it was now for her. Anna originally thought that the Communists would forbid religion but the officers even went to church together with the Old Believers when the Russians were stationed in Sfiştofca after the Second World War. One of the officers wore a cross and knew the names of all the icons. He knew more about the icons than the Old Believers themselves.

Anna told me that she did not need the EU and had no idea what it was all about. She said that Ceausescu should not have been killed. Ceausescu was known as "papa" in Romania and, according to Anna, everything would have been absolutely ok if Ceausescu had been allowed

to live. On the other hand, Anna thought that the situation of those people who had suffered under Communism had improved after Ceausescu's death.

Anna went to church on Saturday, Sunday and holidays. She explained that, apart from the church services, there was no other entertainment in Sfiştofca.

Taking Anna Shigarov as an example, we see that – in spite of the fact that they often live in rural, extremely remote regions – there is a global network of Old Believers. In addition, it is fascinating to note that not all of the Soviet officers in post-war Romania were atheist Communists and that some were shown to be believing, orthodox Christians.

Nadeschda Kulina

Nadeschda Kulina was 76 years of age when she died in the year 2014. Nadya had a son and four daughters. She also had a brother and three sisters who lived in Sulina. Nadya was a housewife throughout her life. In her leisure time, she occasionally visited the club room next to the shop and went to church. Nadya did not go anywhere before she died because she had severe pain in her feet.

Nadya was born in Sfiştofca and attended the Russian school in the village for four years.

Nadya was occasionally visited by her siblings and children. Three daughters and a son live in Tulcea; the fourth daughter lives in Sfiştofca. She lives in the first house one passes when one arrives in Sfiştofca from C.A. Rosetti.

Nadya's parents came from Sfiştofca and she had a cousin in Vilkovo. After her cousin died, Nadya no longer had any connections to the Ukrainian side of the Danube Delta. Nadya felt that life was good in the Socialist era and had remained so. While Ceausescu was in power, Nadya visited her cousin in Vilkovo. She obtained a visa and travelled across the Danube into the Soviet Union. Nadya described the situation after the change as being not all that bad. At the time, she had some cattle and a lot of work. Before her death, Nadya only had a horse and a dog. Nadya felt that Romania's accession to the EU was ok for her. The main thing was for people to live in peace. Nadya used to go to church regularly but the problems with her feet made this no longer possible. Nadya stated that she was just sitting at home waiting for death to come to her from Periprava. She said that death lived in Periprava. Nadya was a peaceful – almost stoic – woman who always tried to come to grips with the situation she found herself in. One of her daughters still lives in Sfiştofca and the permanent contact to her provided Nadya with a sense of security and optimism in her old age.

Lazer Kuzov

Lazer Kuzov died in 2015 at 76 years of age. He had a daughter and two sons. Lazer was sent into retirement when he was 55 years old. Until then, he worked as a fisherman. Lazer worked in a fishing enterprise in Sulina for 26 years and then went out to sea as a fisherman for five and a half years after which he worked again in Sulina for some time. Lazer worked at home with his wife in his retirement. Together, they went to collect water, chopped wood, went fishing in the canal, shopping and to church services. Lazer often said that he and his wife always had something to do and looked forward to the years God had given them to live. Lazer's daughter and elder son Wassily are already married. Wassily has three children and lives in Tulcea; Lazer's younger son, Alexander, works as a cook on various ocean-going ships.

Lazer liked to play the accordion in his free time. He used to play at weddings and other festivities but, after he retired, only played at home from time to time. Lazer often mentioned that he still enjoyed playing his instrument. Every year, a major festival celebrating the consecration of the church in Sfiștofca attracted guests from Tulcea, Sulina, Braila and Galati and Lazer always had a good time then with his children and other people who visited Sfiștofca.

Lazer was born in Sfiștofca and had two brothers and two sisters. When he was a child, Lazer went fishing and collected reeds with his father and siblings. His brothers and sisters gradually left Sfiștofca and Lazer was the only one of the five to remain in the village. Lazer was living in Sfiștofca at the time of our interview and repeatedly stated that his children's visits were the highlights of his life. When they came, Lazer sang, played music and danced. In addition, he and his children cooked together and everybody had a good time. Lazer's children left Sfiștofca many years ago; his sons live in Tulcea and his daughter moved to Italy.

Like his father, Lazer was born in Sfiștofca. After their children had left the village, Lazer's wife Marusja tried to convince her husband to move to the city as well. Lazer did not want to do this as he had always had close ties to his home and realised that it was possible to live more economically in the country than in larger towns. Lazer's pension was only 650 lei and he grew much of the produce he needed in his own garden in Sfiștofca. In spite of that, most of Lazer's pension still went on buying food.

Lazer went to school in Sfiștofca for four years; at the time, Russian was the language of instruction. In the early 1960s, some years after the Communists had assumed power, this was changed from Russian to Romanian. Lazer's father did not want his children to attend school

for more than four years because he felt that the time would come when people with a higher level of education would have to work as street sweepers. After his four years of education, Lazer started working as a fisherman.

Lazer's siblings are all still alive. One sister lives in Sulina and one in Constanza; one of his brothers lives in Old Kiliya and the older one has his home in Tulcea. Lazer organised a meeting with his family and relatives in Sfiştofca on high holidays such as New Year's Day, Easter and the celebration of the consecration of the village church on 14 October. Many relatives would have liked to have visited Lazer more often but the roads to Sfiştofca are in a very poor condition. There used to be share taxis to Sfiştofca but most of them have stopped operating. Lazer sometimes mentioned that his younger son Alexander often visited while Wassily, the older son, hardly ever showed his face in Sfiştofca. Whenever Lazer spoke about Wassily and Alexander, he also mentioned that he had had a third son who had drowned many years ago.

When Lazer was still a child, his father told him that his grandfather had moved from Vilkovo to Sfiştofca after the October Revolution. Believers were persecuted in the newly-founded Soviet Union after the First World War and there were mass executions and many churches were destroyed. This happened on the ground that there was no God. This shows that Lazer's forebears on his father's side came from Vilkovo.

When he spoke about his connections to the Ukrainian section of the Danube Delta, Lazer said that he had some nieces and nephews in Vilkovo, Izmail and other places. Sometimes he regretted not having any contact with his Ukrainian relatives. Lazer would have liked to have visited the Ukraine to see how they were doing but he would have needed money and a passport to do that.

Lazer said that he felt that life was not so bad for people during the Socialist period under Ceausescu. Everybody had work and a minimum wage from which it was possible to live reasonably well. There was also little criminality. Under Ceausescu, all of the shops belonged to the state and were supplied with goods by government workers while now the shops were owned by private persons who had to make sure that they were sufficiently well-stocked themselves. Lazer often complained that food had become rather expensive after the change and that he had to carefully consider what he bought and what he could do without.

In Socialist days, Lazer had travelled around the world as a seaman. New York, Las Palmas, Mauritania, Istanbul, Canada and Berlin were just some of the places he had visited. Lazer could remember seeing the illuminated Berlin Wall at night. Lazer not only travelled by ship but sometimes also by train or plane.

Lazer said that simple people like him did not know what the European Union meant and the goals Romania had from its accession. He felt that well-educated people, those with a university degree, knew more about these matters.

Lazer told me that he went to church from time to time, lit a candle and prayed for a person who was important for him. According to Lazer, getting to the church was so wearying for many old people that they had to lie down and rest in bed after they returned home from the services. Lazer said that the church in Sfiștofca was only attended by people from the village as Old Believers living elsewhere, such as in Periprava, had their own churches.

Lazer was a very outgoing and hospitable man. Visits from his children, relatives and acquaintances were the highlights in his life.

Conclusion

In Sfiștofca, I did not meet country bumpkins who had spent their lives, secluded, at one and the same place but seamen who had seen other continents, experienced other cultures and visited foreign cities such as New York, Halifax, Las Palmas and Nouakchott in the days of Communism, an experience very few people living in the East Bloc were able to make. In the post-Communist era, it was also customary to earn money abroad as a construction worker or geriatric nurse – and it still is. One could almost see Sfiștofca as a “global village” if it was not in a state of dissolution.

The Lipovans are traditionally multilingual. As Russians, they speak an Old Russian dialect that has been preserved in this isolated region and not been integrated into today’s standard Russian. The faithful still celebrate mass in Church Slavonic. As Romanian citizens, the main part of their education takes place in Romanian. In addition, many Lipovans – especially those who have worked in a foreign country – speak another language. One encounters people who have learned Serbian, Italian, Spanish or English because their work made this necessary. However, another characteristic is a decline in social and family life as a result of the long periods of separation that very few family relationships managed to survive unscathed. Divorces and patchwork families are possibly more common in Sfiștofca than elsewhere. In spite of being well-qualified, having completed secondary education or attended a technical college, some Lipovans are impoverished. Their work assignments were often only for a limited period and, in times of recession, it was recommended to them that they return home. At home, there were also no possibilities to make money. The period of separation with a relatively high level of prosperity was followed by a period of living together that was full of conflict and without a suitable income. As a result, many families collapsed.

Other villagers have always remained in the region. Most of them were less well-educated and lived from the local resources of the delta – fishing, livestock breeding, reed farming, and casual construction labour – as had many generations before them. They remained closer to the religion of the Old Believers than those who lived abroad. However, Sfiștofca’s location on the economic periphery means that they were also unable to profit from the bursts of economic growth of the past decades.

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