

Deportation to Transnistria – the Story of Anuta Branzan

„[The deportation] affected us greatly. But I never lost my belief in humanity. Some tried to shoot us; others took what they had from their pockets - a chocolate - to give us to eat. There are good and bad people everywhere.” - Anuta Branzan, interviewed in 1999.

In 1942, eight-year-old Anuta lived in Rosiori de Vede with her parents Pavel and Constantina Radu, her older sister Marieta, and her younger sisters Margareta and Virginia. When the local police came to deport them in September, the girls were preparing to start school. Upon learning of the impending estrangement, Anuta's aunt rushed the girls to a photographer's studio to make one last photo of her beloved nieces. After a harrowing journey in cattle cars, the Radus alongside nearly 13,000 other non-nomadic Romanian Roma, were partitioned into Transnistrian labor camps. Ill-prepared for arrivals, local authorities exacerbated the already horrid situation by putting deportees in open fields or abandoned barns until more permanent shelters were found. Anuta recalls vividly the two years of agonizing deterioration of her family by the inhuman living conditions, the humiliation of forced labor, and the continual hunger that plagued her.

They took us to a farm, which had a barn and a storage facility. We didn't all fit in there so the rest of us stayed outside. We slept outside for about a month. Then they took us with horse wagons to some military barracks on the seacoast, very close to a town [Oceacov]. They kept us there for two months. Then they put us in horse wagons and divided us in sectors. Traditional Roma on one side, the Romanianized Roma some place else...in that village - Vladimirovka. It had only two streets. They moved the Russians living on one street to the other one and put two families to a house. Then they moved us, as many as could fit, into the houses. We were more than 700 people there. Some three, four, or five families to a house. There were Romanian gendarmes [guarding us].

They took us a few times to work in the cornfields to cut weeds from the corn. As a child, I went as well. Russian women would say, "Come on, you go too. Anushka, to the corn," and they showed me how to pick [corn], how to carry as much as I green corn as I could for the cows to eat. Once two Romanian gendarmes caught me in the field and beat me with the whip, so hard that I shit on myself. They said if they ever catch me there again, they would kill me. What was I doing there? Meaning I should just sit there, like in a camp. We were not even allowed to go into our yards. We weren't allowed even to make a step from the yard outside, on the sidewalk. So what was I doing there [in the field]....We did not have contact [with the villagers].¹ We were kept under armed guard. We weren't even allowed to go get some water. If the water came they would knock at the gate, yell from the street to come out with your bucket, your pitcher, cups, whatever you had to get water from the wagon. If you didn't have anything [to put it in] or if you couldn't go out because you were sick, you suffered. You did not even have water to wet your mouth, not even a cup of water. Nothing. They tortured us to kill us.

¹ Contact between locals and deportees was limited. They met either in the fields for work, when guards allowed home owners to check on their houses now occupied by Roma, or for burying the dead.



(Anuta Branzan and her sisters in 1942)

[Guards] gave us a little bit of food or none at all. We were like sick cows, closed in. No food. For a while they brought us some grains like for the cows, a can filled with grains, but not more than [for] two or three months. And then they didn't give us anything anymore. Absolutely nothing. And there was no doctor there with us. No medication. Absolutely nothing. To think, I wasn't even eight or nine years old, what could I do? As long as [my parents] were alive I didn't suffer very much. My mother gave us her food. My father sold everything we had. He sold most of the clothes, even some that were ripped. The clothes became too little so my father sold them. [Later] in the summer we foraged some greens – grass, roots to eat. We did not even have water to drink. Thin. Wretched.

The powers from above must have kept us alive. We were without food, without water. Like animals in the wild. You waited - maybe you would die. You expected only to die. You did not expect any joy. Your day to die, that's all you waited for there.

A young girl who had stayed with us in the house got sick with typhus. My father took her away so that we would not get sick, too, but we still got sick. [My mother] did not eat anymore, she didn't even drink water. She would only hit her head against the walls. She would go in a barn and cry and scream, saying, "I look at my children now they don't even have water, they don't have any bread, which we used to carry [at home] with a basket and a bucket fruit for them. And now they don't even have water."

When she saw us in such a state, immediately she got sick. She only lasted four months, that's how long my mother resisted. And after three or four days she died of typhus. When our mother died, my middle sister slept in her arms all night. [Margareta] didn't know that she was dead. I realized that my mother was dead when my father started crying, and the others in the room said, "That's it, she's dead." My mother cared for [Margareta] the most, because she was more sensitive and she loved my mother the most and was always with her. And all that night [my sister] slept in her dead arms.

The Russians who were in the village were forced to take care of the dead and they had a wagon and a hook, I think it was five meters long, so that they wouldn't get close to the sick. They forced the people in the house to load them [in the wagon]. Every day they would come and knock on the window to ask if you had any dead. And if you did, you had to go throw them into the wagon yourself, and they would take the dead to the grave and pull the body with that five-meter hook into the grave. They dug a big grave, and put hundreds of people there.

In the morning, a man knocked on the window. "Do you have dead?" My father said yes. My sister looked up, "Who's dead?" "Mother." Then she realized that mother was dead. My father had to take [my mother] out to put her in the wagon, with nobody next to her.² Who knows where they took her and threw her. In the spring [my father] found out how hundreds of dead were buried in a common grave. We didn't have the possibility to bury the dead. We had no candles. You buried them like

² I translated this sentence as is, but I believe Ana meant, "with no one to stay with her." After a loved one dies, Orthodox Christians traditionally sit beside the body until it is buried, never leaving it alone. Family and friends take turns staying with the deceased.

dogs. And [the villagers] left them there like the dogs and ran as fast as [they] could. You only waited for tomorrow to die. You waited from moment to moment to die. They didn't shoot us, not this, but they made us suffer. Hungry, without water, without anything. They left us to die like that, hungry, closed in, isolated, to get sick from typhus.

We were orphaned, without any one to care for us, without any help. We were like birds in the sky. Wherever we could fly to find a kernel of grain, we did. It was only through the power of God that we resisted and were able to come home. We were left without mom and dad, and we returned home. It was only the power of God that kept us alive through the hunger and thirst, so that we lived.

Lit.: Michelle Kelso, Gypsy Deportation from Romania to Transnistria 1942-44. In the Shadow of the Swastika. Hartfield 1999; Viorel Achim, Documente privind deportarea tiganilor in Romania, Editura Enciclopedica, Bucuresti, 2004.