

Deportation to Transnistria – the Story of Dinu Mirica

*„A lot of things happened to me, and I learned a lot. I saw many things – both good and bad.”
Dinu Mirica.*

Dinu Mirica was “born at the wheel of the horse wagon” in 1906 to a family of nomadic Romani comb makers who traveled from county to county in Romania selling their wares. One of 12 children, Dinu recalls vividly life on the road prior to their deportation to Transnistria. Early on his mother nicknamed him “Kaiser” after the German emperor, a name that would later become ironic, as the country that his family had so greatly admired would institute biological racism in the form of extermination of Roma - a policy of genocide that would extend into Dinu's homeland. In 1942, Dinu alongside his wife and daughter, as well as his parents and siblings, were deported to Transnistria by Romanian authorities because of their itinerant lifestyle. Less than a year later Dinu's wife and daughter died in a camp.

We were in a Gypsy caravan (satra), as we didn't have houses. We were nomadic Gypsies.¹ Semi-nomads, really. In the winter we lived in houses and in summer we left. We had our tents and wagons. And we put them up at night and there we slept. Big tents. We had long sticks and we put on the wagon, stretching out the tent canvas over the wagon and there we were staying.



(Map of Romania and so called „Transnistria” 1941-1942)

¹ The term that Dinu uses in Romanian is *tigani*, which is translated into English as Gypsy.

We camped on the margins [of communities] with the wagons, gathering all our identification papers among us. Our leader (bulibasa) went with them to the mayor's office or the head of the rural police. „Look sir, we have arrived. Here are our papers.” „Well boys, you can stay but don't do anything stupid.” That's all they would say, don't do anything stupid. And that's how we were traveling, today here, tomorrow in Turnu, the next day in Bucharest, Craiova, Pitesti, Ramnicu Valcea. We traveled with a comb, a scissors - selling them. We were wandering from village to village. When nighttime came, we went to the mayor's office, „Here are our papers.” We stayed 24 hours, two days, three days, however many they would allow. We would pay the mayor's office for the grazing grass for the horses, which ate from from prairies, two lei², three lei per family. We would get corn meal, flour, cheese, onions, garlic, beans. We were making food and eating it there, that's how we lived as nomadic Gypsies. My father was the leader (bulibasa). We weren't a lot of wagons together because you couldn't make a living. Four, five, six was too many because each family was numerous, lots of kids and you couldn't stop in a village otherwise. So we gathered three-four families, our relatives, going from village to village, giving our paperwork and selling our combs. When we finished we got back our papers from the mayor's office or rural police and we left. They gave us our papers and certificates of good behavior. „So and so with his family, his is an honest man, they behaved well and we had no trouble with them.” Where ever we went we showed our certificates of good behavior from the places we stayed. „All is well, boys.” That's how we traveled. In December we would rent houses and leave on the 15 or 20th of March.

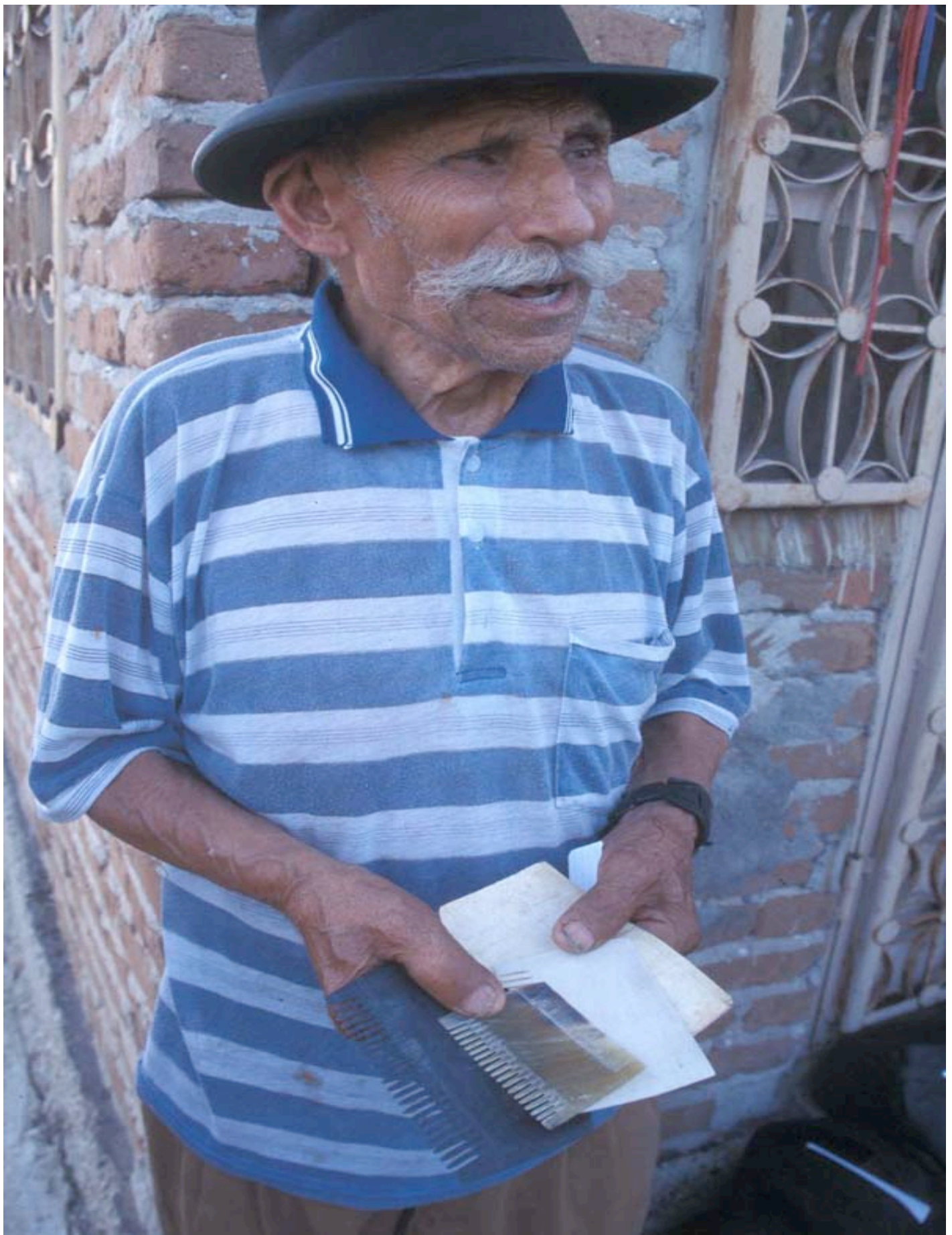
The women went through the village with hooks and combs [selling them] and they got cornmeal, beans, whatever God wanted - onions, garlic. They would bring a bit of plum brandy to drink. We [men] made things at home. We made scissors. That was our craft. We had an authorization from the prefecture to circulate from county to county. We got our authorization from the Interior Ministry,

„So and So, together with his family can go to Olt, Arges, Teleorman, Bucegi and Valcea.” And it said, „the administration and the police will supervise and control so that public order is not disturbed in villages, towns, and cities.”

This is how we were going. You went to the mayor's office, „born at the wheel of the wagon.” Hey, we were vagabonds. At the edge of the village. Where ever you were born, you were born. Where ever you were baptised, you were baptised. If someone died on the road, you went to city hall to the doctor. The doctor would come and give us a death certifiat, which we brought to city hall so that we could bury [the dead] there. Where ever you died, you were buried.

We were 12 children, ten boys and two girls. Many died in 1916 when typhus came. When I grew up, I had only two brothers and a sister. They were with me in Transnistria. I was the youngest. The last one. The youngest child in the family is obligated to take care of the parents, with food and with their needs; if he marries, his family has to wash for them, make food. I cared for them both. Mother and father. If they cared for me, I had to care for them. We didn't fight. Dad would say, „Son, what we have comes from God, and God will help us. Don't think that if you do something bad that God doesn't know. He knows when you are bad and good.” And that's why we know and appreciate God.

2 Romanian currency is the leu, and the plural form is lei.



During that time we worked for landlord, during the times when people didn't buy things. We were with our horse wagons at the margin of the village, with our tents. And we brought food to our tents. We worked for twelve hours with two hour breaks. We rested and went back to work. Saturdays and Sundays we were free. We stayed in May, June, July and August and on the first of September, we left.

[We made combs] from the horns of oxen. A wagonload of horns you got [from] the slaughter house. We took the horns and boiled them in a pot. A big pot. And as it heated up, the inside of the horn came out. We would take 100 pairs, 200 pairs. With what money you had. It was a coin per pair. There was lice in the country then, on my word of honor. From the landlord we got money, „Hey craftsman, make me a comb.” It was dirty then, not like now. Before we wore shirts made from hemp. Important people had suits of hemp, and leather slippers [opinici]. From the skin of the pigs Romanians made slippers. We grew up wearing those slippers. Shirts of hemp, and on the sleeves we embroidered flowers. You beat the hemp, you put water, it would soak in, and you would beat it again. We had two wooden sticks. One of them was like a knife. We beat it until it got hard. Then we rolled it up and put it in the loom to weave.

We weren't obligated [to make combs]. You did it with the family. You worked it out with mom and dad, with your relatives. If you didn't want to do it, you didn't. But you had to work, to make something to sell: combs, umbrellas, hooks; so that you could live. Dad would get [an order] for 100 combs and we'd make them in two, three, four days. And in the evenings when we were working, dad put us to work on combs, „Let's sing! I am making food, you all eat and sing.” We lived very well. We had no expenses. We ate and sang, and when we made money we bought clothes.

We didn't go to school. Only those who wanted to go went. We set up tents here and they went to school. No one in my [family] knows how to read. If we were traveling, who was there to teach us to read. People were backwards. All you knew was to eat and to work. You didn't care about books. Who ever saw a Gypsy priest? I never saw a Gypsy priest.

People were backwards [then], but it was really good. We lived well. We weren't spoiled. We were like God's bread. We lived for free. Where ever the women went, they brought food. Times were good. We we drank; we partied. My brother had and played a harmonica. And we sang and had a good time. Dad would laugh and make jokes. And there was happiness inside us; it was golden our happiness.

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.