

“AND FROM MILITARY FRONTIER GUARDS THEY MADE US PEASANTS ...”

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„Și ne-au făcut din grănițeri, țărani...”. Mentalități colective în satele năsăudene foste grănicerești în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea [“And from military frontier guards they made us peasants ...”. *Collective Mentalities in the Former Military Frontier Villages, in Năsăud Region, during the Second Half of the 19th Century*] / Claudia Septimia SABĂU; Editura Mega, 2015; 335 p. + annexes.

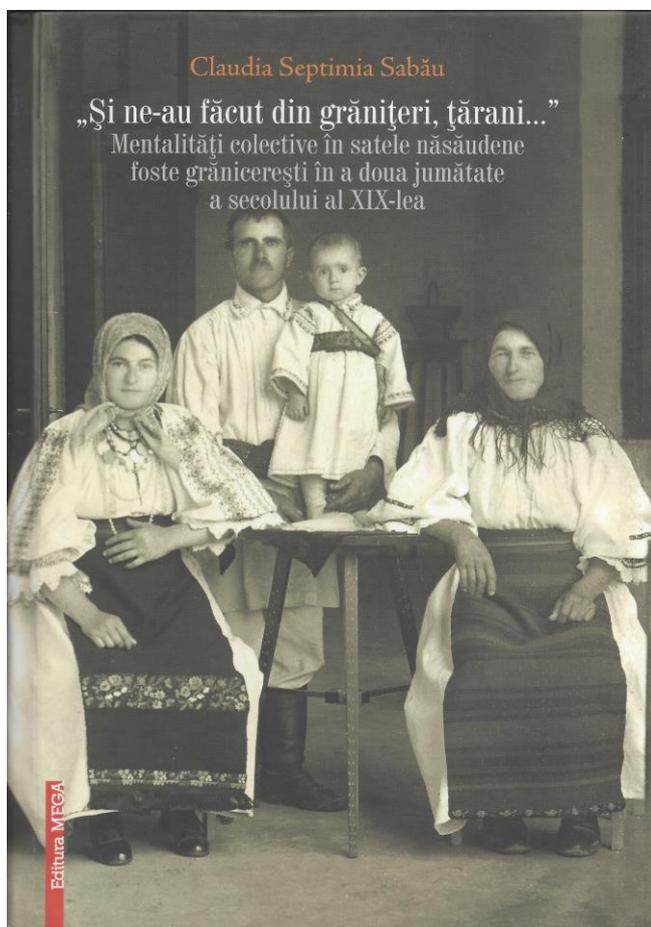
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Initially a Ph.D. thesis, the volume authored by Claudia Septimia Sabău “*Și ne-au făcut din grănițeri, țărani... ’. Mentalități colective în satele năsăudene foste grănicerești în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*” [“And from military frontier guards they made us peasants ...”. *Collective Mentalities in the Former Military Frontier Villages, in Năsăud Region, during the*

Second Half of the 19th Century], gives evidence to the complexity of the Land of Năsăud [Țara Năsăudului] – a distinct ethnographical, historical, and geographical area, which attracts the interest of many researchers from various disciplines. This region offers to historians, geographers, sociologists, folklorists and anthropologists many opportunities to investigate the life of its communities, underlining and comparing their traditions to those from other parts of Transylvania.

Claudia Septimia Sabău also follows this route, but chooses to focus on a less explored subject, namely that of the rural daily life in villages of Năsăud region, and sometimes, in contrast, in Năsăud town itself, during the second half of the 19th century. Her work is a fine example of an interdisciplinary approach towards a specific theme, aiming to recreate and examine the realities of a bygone world. The author defines her study



as follows: “*analysing the collective mentalities of the Năsăud population during life's three essential moments: birth, marriage and death represents a complex and original endeavour, affiliated to the most recent research methods of the historical past*” (p. 22). Furthermore, she justifies the chronological and territorial boundaries of her research, pointing out that a rather limited number of works have so far investigated the evolution of the Land of Năsăud after the dissolution of the Military Frontier Regiment, namely after 1851. Forty-four Romanian villages and rural communities, spread over four separate river valleys (the Someș, the Bârgău, the Șieu, and the Mureș) were included in the Military Frontier Regiment and forged over the time of their existence a specific identity, which continued to manifest itself long after the Habsburgs’ reforms, which put an end to their military service in the midst of the 19th century. As Claudia Septimia Sabău rightly points out, the Land of Năsăud mentality, which came into being during the era of the military frontier regiments, was based mainly on two elements: a powerful feeling of individual freedom and the consciousness of being an owner of land or other type of economic assets. These qualities made up and held together the local society, being traced in the region long after the end of the Military Frontier Regiment, sometimes even until today.

Based on documents from various sources (church, administrative or private archives, etc.), Dr. Sabău looks closely at the customs and traditions of the Năsăud area, as she proceeds to a difficult investigation. Indeed, she researches a complex socio-economic phenomenon: as the title of her book suggests – *from military frontier guards to peasants* -, the author traces in fact a gradual ‘downgrading’ of a specific region, brought about by external factors, namely by the decisions of the Habsburg and later of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Consequently, Claudia Septimia Sabău structured her work into four main parts, each focusing on a specific moment of the individual and collective destiny of the Năsăud region.

Chapter II, titled *Ținutul năsăudean în cea de-a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea [Năsăud Region in the 2nd Half of the 19th Century]*, presents the changes that took place in the area after the disappearance of the Military Frontier Regiment. What the interested reader can learn after reading these pages is the fact that, after 1851, the Land of Năsăud continued to enjoy a quite privileged status, compared to the surrounding parts of Transylvania. Thus, the historical sources reveal a demographic growth – from 39,092 inhabitants in 1851 to 74,820 in 1910 –, but, most importantly, a constant interest and effort to remain educated and maintain a close relationship with the school, the church and the local public administrations (p. 48, p. 54). As a local priest testified: “[*here*]...*you hardly find a family where one of two persons does not know how to read*” [*mai cu samă de 30 de ani încoace abia află o familie, în care să nu știe din doi, unul a cetii*] (pp. 73-74.)

The third chapter attempts a complicated task: that of retracing the childhood universe within the Năsăud communities of the last half of the 19th century. The difficulty of this endeavour resides in the scarcity of the sources which document the children’s first years. Dr. Sabău relies heavily on ethnographic and folkloric studies, that she sometimes completes with several case studies and individual stories in order to sketch the problems of mothers and children from the Năsăud region. Her investigation highlights several interesting facts. The first one speaks about the constant preoccupation of the state and of the local authorities to provide the region with well-trained, qualified midwives (pp. 87-88) – an effort that did not always succeed in discarding the popular customs surrounding the birth. In addition, the author shortly discusses christening practices, before focusing on a second relevant topic: that of abortion. Since this practice fell under the incidence of the penal law, the author analyses a number of abortion cases which were brought to justice. As a result, Dr. Sabău says that, while the small number of

individual examples cannot testify to the amplitude of the abortion phenomenon in the area and hinders any relevant conclusions, it partially lifts the veil on the private lives of the Năsăud peasants and on the various social perceptions surrounding this act (pp. 116-117). In our opinion, the most relevant parts of this chapter are the ones that explore the way small children and youngsters were brought up within the local communities. The civilian and religious authorities looked carefully after the young people. Everyone made serious efforts for schooling the children and many regulations were issued for their educational activities, as well as for their leisure time (pp. 139-153).

Claudia Septimia Sabău continues her investigation on life's cycles in chapter four, the most lengthy and consistent part of the book. Here she studies in detail the Năsăud family, paying significant attention to the norms and customs that accompany the appearance and the evolution of a new couple. The reader is therefore presented with a vast panorama of folkloric traditions, ranging from courting to the engagement time and, finally, to the wedding itself, sometimes even to adultery, divorce or cohabitation relationships. In a special section of this chapter, the author temporarily leaves the rural world and examines how the intellectuals of Năsăud chose their ideal partner. This offers an interesting contrast and relevant comparison material for the readers, and we can only regret that her effort stopped so short, as Dr. Sabău does not consistently maintain her urban investigation on all the other matrimonial aspects that are presented in this chapter. However, an exception is made when she discusses the way the dowry was established, as she looks first at the strict regulations in place before 1851, when the region was governed by the rules of the Military Frontier Regiment, and the way things gradually changed after its dissolution. Here she speaks again about the customs that differentiated Năsăud town (former capital of the Military Frontier Regiment) from the surrounding villages.

Amongst the various facts that surrounded the long road towards a new family, several details stand out, such as, for example, the exams that some communities introduced around the 1860s for the future grooms and brides – the young pair had to be questioned from the subjects that were taught in the primary, village school (pp. 224-226). Those who failed the exam were forced to return to study and learn at least to read and to write, prior to be married. Besides the inherent economic requirements implied by every nuptial ceremony, this element testifies to the progressive, modernizing tendencies which governed the Năsăud region long after the dissolution of the Military Frontier Regiment, distinguishing it quite significantly from other parts of Transylvania. However, in many other aspects, the appearance of a new family observed ancestral Romanian customs and reflected typical Transylvanian social prejudices, as well as personal choices and, sometimes, even simple human contradictions.

The fifth and final chapter deals with the last moments of an individual's life. Death and its contiguous funeral ceremonies were a regular presence in the Năsăud communities. The author describes and analyses the way people prepared for their final journey – by writing testaments and, sometimes, even by setting up the procedures of their own funeral (a custom more spread amongst the intellectual elite than amongst regular peasants). Dr. Sabău also points out the strong resistance of the locals towards the attempts of the civil authorities to modify the funeral rituals, based on public health concerns. Last but not least, she looks at several cases of self murderers, a rare, yet not unusual occurrence in the village world. Regrettably, while the information included in this chapter is interesting and varied, the conclusions do not match their complexity. We do not have a nuanced interpretation of the presented facts and documents, other than the idea of long-lasting funeral traditions.

To conclude, we can say that the book of Claudia Septimia Sabău is a reliable, necessary study of the Land of Năsăud and its inhabitants in the second half of the 19th century. The interested reader can find here a historical fresco that reflects the everyday life of the Năsăud locals, according to the model Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby had set in their famous *Histoire de la vie privée*. And, although this research has not completely elucidated the theoretical and practical discussion regarding how much or how little the mentalities changed in the region after the dissolution of the Military Frontier Regiment in 1851, it remains an important contribution to the local and regional history of Transylvania. For those interested especially in investigating the problems of childhood and education in the 19th century, as well as for those interested in examining how rural families lived in the Land of Năsăud more than a hundred and fifty years ago, this book should be a compulsory reference.