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YOUNG TRANSYLVANIANS BETWEEN MEMORIES OF A MULTICULTURAL PAST AND ASPIRATIONS FOR A EUROPEAN FUTURE: A PHOTOVOICE PROJECT IN A GERMAN-LANGUAGE SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

Despite the drastically diminished size of the centuries-old German-speaking minority of Transylvania since 1989, German-language schools thrive as they attract an increasing number of students originating from the ethnic Romanian majority population.

A participatory photography project explored how these young multilingual Transylvanians position themselves in relation to the German-Saxon heritage in their social and physical environment. An important aim was to trace any shifts in ethnic self-identification, and to assess the actual importance of ethnic categories as opposed to socio-economic considerations.

The project also explored ways in which a Photovoice approach is useful combined with other, non-visual methods.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic minorities, migration, memory, Romania, Transylvania, schools, photography, Photovoice, mixed methods.

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INTRODUCTION

Transylvania, the region to the north and west of the Carpathian mountains, which has been part of the Romanian state for almost a century, has had a particularly changing political history. The past of Transylvania – as a province of the Roman Empire, part of the medieval kingdom of Hungary, independent principality under Ottoman suzerainty, later incorporated in the Austrian Empire, yielded to Hungary and finally merged with Romania – bestowed a legacy of relative toleration and mostly peaceful coexistence between the various ethnic groups that make up Transylvanian society.

A German-speaking community has lived in the area since a Hungarian ruler in the 12th century invited, or at least acknowledged, settlers from the medieval German Empire. People refer to this group of German-speaking Romanians by the name of "Saxons," although they hailed not from Saxony but from various German territories, mostly the middle Rhine region close to today's Luxemburg. For centuries, they have been a distinctive, mainly self-governed community with their own language, church and schools.[1] The Second World War brought disruption and upheaval to the Saxons as to all German-speaking minorities in Eastern and Central Europe. A part of the Saxon community fled in the wake of 1945, the Romanian state authorities deported others to Russia, expropriated and stripped most Saxons of their civil rights before rehabilitating them as members of a formally recognized minority in the mid-1950s. Socialist Romania set up a secret cash-for-migrants scheme that enabled thousands of Saxons to resettle in West Germany (Bayer and Hüsch 2013). Following the 1989 revolution, the steady trickle of emigration became a stream in what can only be called a mass exodus towards Germany. Once a prosperous and in many ways influential community,[2] the German-speaking population of this Carpathian region has been reduced to less than a tenth of its original size as a result of these different migration waves. In Hermannstadt/Sibiu, the former Saxon stronghold, merely 1,500, i.e. 1 % of the population, still considered themselves as part of the "German minority" in the latest official census (2011).[3]

Yet paradoxically, the schools set up by and for this vanishing minority thrive more than ever. Since 1989, German-language schools have proved extremely popular with the ethnic Romanian majority population.[4] I first chanced upon Romanian students with a German-language educational background when I was at the University of Cluj, North-Western Transylvania, during a teaching exchange in early 2012. Their language skills were so impressive that it was easy to mistake them for ethnic Germans; only their names gave them away. The contrast with average West European German learners could not have been any starker: these students handled the language effortlessly and with an almost eerie accuracy that could put native Germans to shame. Since that first encounter, I won-

[1] Transylvanian Saxons of Transylvania have hardly been investigated by anthropologists. One exception is Katherine Verdery's work on ethnic relations, property and battles over land ownership, based on field research in communities with a Saxon presence (e.g. Verdery 1983, 2003; Kligman and Verdery 2011). Literature on ethnicity in Transylvania tends to focus on Hungarian-Romanian relations (such as Kürti 1989 and Brubaker 2006). Folklorists, historians and (few) sociologists have published a number of German- and Romanian-language accounts about Saxon ethnography and history both before and since 1989.

[2] About 540.000 German-speaking people lived in Transylvania in the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. they made up about 10 % of the population (Varga 1989).

[3] National Institute for Statistics, Results of the 2011 census, table 8, "Populația stabilă după etnie – județe, municipii, orașe, comune" (Institutul National de Statistică 2013). In 1930, 43.8 % of the population of Sibiu were classified as Saxons (Roth 2006:199).

[4] This phenomenon is new and has not been analysed in depth. Research on German-language schools in Transylvania has focused on their history, in particular in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (e.g. König 1996 and von Puttkamer 2003), or on pedagogical and didactic issues, such as language acquisition (Ginghină 2015).

dered how this new generation of proficient German speakers positioned themselves in relation to the German-Saxon history of Romania. As they tread in the footsteps of the Saxons, are taught in German from kindergarten age onward, interact daily with their (rare) Saxon peers, Saxon and German teachers, do their ethnic self-identifications shift in any way? How do they negotiate the different ethnic categorizations that are available to them, and what significance does the German-Saxon heritage actually hold for this group? Do ethnic categories matter to this young generation at all, and if so, which ones and why?[5]

This article deals with a research project which explored these questions from September 2013 onward. I begin by discussing the choice of Photovoice as the central approach, in conjunction with other methods. The next section describes the main features of the project: the school setting, the participants, collaboration with other facilitators, the general timeframe and the different project stages. The third part of the article presents the key results of the participants' work: different ways in which students explored their relation to German/Saxon elements in their lives, as intended, but also a number of unforeseen topics which were uncovered in the course of the Photovoice project. Lastly, a final section assesses the contribution of this research to Transylvanian studies and discusses the advantages and limitations of a mixed methods approach in visual anthropology.

CHOICE OF METHODS

For several reasons, Photovoice appeared to be the most adequate method to reach the objectives of this research project. Affording an inside perspective, Photovoice encouraged the bilingual German-Romanian students to express themselves in a medium that was easily available to them rather than having various discourses about them recorded and analysed. Researchers often use visual anthropology, and Photovoice in particular, with young people as – at least to some extent – it evens out literacy differentials between the researcher and the participants, and it allows the less literate and articulate to make their viewpoints seen (Johnson, Pfister and Vindrola-Padros 2012:165; Oester and Brunner 2015:18). This proved to be a decisive aspect in the multilingual context of Transylvania, as we conducted the project in German, and not all young Romanian participants had yet reached the kind of linguistic proficiency that had impressed me at the university of Cluj two years earlier.

A certain educational ethos has informed Photovoice since its inception. In the 1990s, Paulo Freire's advocacy for critical pedagogy influenced Caroline Wang and her co-researchers; likewise, Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper list Appadurai's work with subaltern youth among their inspirations (Gubrium and Harper 2013:26). Capacity building and empowerment remain central elements of the Photovoice toolbox and objectives. As I planned to work in a school setting, Photo-

[5] Pro-German attitudes in Romania, both past and present, have been investigated on the basis of literature and press reports, in the field of intellectual history or media studies (Boia 2003; Cercel 2015), but not ethnographically.

voice made the project acceptable to the teaching community on account of its pedagogical virtues, yet at the same time it gave the students freedom to move both physically and intellectually, thus transcending the traditional educational framework.

Practical advantages included the low training requirements (Gubrium and Harper 2013:37) as well as the feasibility of a Photovoice project given the group size and the time constraints that the school imposed.

Apart from Photovoice, we also used visual elicitation methods during several group discussions that preceded different photography sessions. More importantly, we devised a questionnaire and administered it in the "pre-production" phase of the actual Photovoice project, about 6 months before the work with the student group started. The aim was to find out what the community concerns were, which topics were salient in the school context, and to gather general information about the student body as a whole. In a later section of this article, I discuss the benefits of combining these seemingly contradictory methods, i.e. a written survey with open-ended questions and participatory visual research.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The project took place in the Colegiul National "Samuel von Brukenthal," a prestigious state-owned school named after an 18th-century Saxon governor of Transylvania, art collector and benefactor.[6] It is situated in Sibiu, a town visibly marked by its Saxon past and with a still palpable Saxon presence. A highly successful mayor, the Saxon Klaus Johannis, ruled the municipality from 2000 until 2014. Some people credit Johannis for thoroughly transforming the town, which culminated in its selectionas European Capital of Culture in 2007, the year when Romania joined the EU. Based on his local success, as well as his sober approach, the people of Romania elected Johannis as president in November 2014. Before starting his political career, he worked as a physics teacher at the Brukenthal school. Written documents first mention the school in 1380; thus, it is one of the oldest German-language schools in Romania. Teaching takes place in an 18th-century building next to the main Protestant church in the very centre of Sibiu. Even after going through a selective admission process, students are so numerous that teaching them requires two separate shifts each day.

During the Photovoice project, I worked with a history teacher of the school. As a first step, we devised a questionnaire with 22 questions on such varied topics as language use in different contexts, media consumption, contact with the Saxon minority, travel experience or projects concerning German-speaking countries. 217 of the more than 800 students of the school (9 classes of the 14-17 year age range) completed the survey. Six months later, seventeen students volunteered for a Photovoice workshop. For one week, during about eight

[6] With the consent of the school management and by deliberate choice, the name of the school has not been anonymised. A minimal description would make the school immediately recognisable to anyone familiar with Transylvania. Likewise, as the participants wished to be acknowledged as the authors of their photographic work, their names have not been changed.

hours per day, these 15 girls and 2 boys at the age of 16/17 (of whom 14 were ethnic Romanians, and 3 with Saxon family ties) worked through a number of questions concerning the significance of German and Saxon elements in their personal lives, their school experience and physical surroundings. We scheduled this period during "projects week" ("şcoala altfel"/"a different kind of school"). "Projects week" takes place just before the spring vacation when students all over Romania explore extracurricular activities or go on trips together.

The Photovoice literature sometimes uses the terms "participants" and "collaborators" interchangeably (Gubrium and Harper emphasize that both have a distinct history; 2013:16). It seems useful to make a distinction between the student *participants* and the adult *collaborators* in this particular context so as to discriminate between different degrees of involvement in the project. The organising team – the history teacher, a local ethnographer/museum professional, a young volunteer with Saxon origins but German citizenship, and myself – decided on the overall programme, prepared group outings, facilitated group decisions, took care of relations with the school management and the local press, among other responsibilities. We collaborated without always sharing exactly the same objectives, as will become clear later on. The student participants obviously produced, discussed, pre-selected and commented the photographs. They enjoyed as much liberty in the wording of their commentaries, and as much aesthetic leeway for their photography as they wanted, but could only marginally impose changes on the organisational framework.

The project week started with general introductions of the collaborators and participants, followed by a presentation of the Photovoice approach and, separately, another one on principles of photograph composition, framing, focus, colour and other photographic "techniques." I took care not to give the impression that we wanted to impose any rules; the idea was to increase students' "visual literacy" and to make them aware of the aesthetic and technical choices they had at their disposal when taking photographs. We divided the participants into 6 groups of 2-3 students and sent them out to two different locations: first the school itself, and then the town centre of Sibiu. Each group could use only one camera. After every photographic excursion, participants discussed and selected a maximum number of 10 photos that they wanted to present to the student group as a whole. Photographs received comments once more during these presentations attended by all participants and collaborators.

The second day started with a presentation of Saxon history and ethnographic heritage given by the museum professional, which I discuss later in this article.

Students then showed photographs taken the day before, reviewed which places of the town they had visited and why (marking them on maps), then left on another photographic excursion to yet unexplored parts of the town.

On the third day, we confronted the participants with a setting that turned out to be rather unfamiliar to most of them, i.e. a series of five formerly predominantly Saxon villages around Sibiu. We gathered again in the school on the forth day, sifting through the many photographs taken in the villages, presenting, commenting and discussing them as well as photographs that students had taken individually in their homes. We also started to prepare a slideshow and the final exhibition of the project, and visited one more village.

The history teacher suggested that the project co-leaders make this final selection rather than the participants themselves so as to gain time and avoid potential conflicts among students. Although this decision deviated somewhat from the traditional Photovoice approach, I am convinced that the choice was right under the circumstances. Even though only two people (the teacher and myself) discussed the about 350 photographs preselected by the student groups, we spent long hours weighing the different choices we had to make in order to narrow down the selection to 80 photographs that we would display in the exhibition. To preserve some degree of transparency – if not participation – we stated the criteria that we had agreed upon: equal representation of all excursions and themes; equal representation of all participants; and in case of doubt, a preference for photographs that were both aesthetically interesting and had powerful commentaries. It has to be said that the students were happy to leave us the choice and did not contest the selection we made.

We printed the photographs, mounted them on boards and exhibited them in the main hall of the school for several weeks. Students prepared a slideshow that they presented to the collaborators, the school director and the local German-language press, taking turns to read out the commentaries that they had written. Two and a half months later, the local museum of Saxon ethnography showed a second exhibition, with a narrower choice of photographs made by the museum professional.

RESULTS

As for any Photovoice project, the outcomes were so rich, multi-stranded and polysemic that it would be impossible to account for them fully within the scope of a single article. The following section singles out the most central issues raised by the photographic work of the project participants. These results include the local reaction to Photovoice as a method; students' relations with and their attitude toward their German-language school; the participants' perspective on ethnic categorizations; their reflections on the past and the future of the community, commodification – or re-appropriation – of ethnic traditions; and the importance of economic considerations, which inform most of the preceding issues. In the last part of the article, I discuss the significance of these findings, their contribution to Transylvanian studies on the one hand, and Photovoice research on the other.

TAKING PHOTOVOICE TO TRANSYLVANIA

From the beginning, the students embraced the very idea of Photovoice with enthusiasm. Figure 1 shows a photograph taken in the school on the first day. A picture of a 2010 PhotoVoice project I presented earlier that day[7] inspired the photograph shown in Figure 1, and it exemplifies the adoption of the Photovoice approach both in its form and in its substance.

The participants staged a metaphorical scene to express their dissatisfaction with the traditional teaching methods that are prevalent in most classes: learning by heart and repetition. By contrast, students understood that our project insisted on their making their own choices and expressing their opinions and ideas.

My collaborators also eagerly approved the Photovoice approach, which I had earlier introduced to them. However, it proved to be sometimes more difficult for both the history teacher and the museum ethnographer to leave engrained habits behind. While fully encouraging free speech and creativity, the teacher had an eye on student attendance and discipline, as befitted his institutional role, and would not leave any parts of the day unplanned, thus creating sometimes a certain time pressure (as I must have done on other occasions as well). As

FIGURE 1 – RESTRICTIONS: IN OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM, WE ARE LIMITED TO A CERTAIN NUMBER OF APPROACHES AND MOST OF TIMES, WE ARE SUPPOSED TO REPEAT INFORMATION ONLY. RALUCA GHELBERE, TEODORA SANDU

[7] "See it our way", a World Vision/PhotoVoice project in Pakistan (2010). The photo in question is called "Sweet sixteen in my culture" and shows a veiled girl behind a fence (*photovoice.org/methodologyseries/method_05/seeitourway/seeitourway.html*, accessed 30 March 2014).

mentioned above, the museum ethnographer gave a presentation on the history of Saxon settlement in Transylvania, traditional Saxon architecture and handicrafts, which was undeniably highly interesting but not completely in keeping with the aim of letting students express themselves instead of reproducing information learnt at school. The presentation comprised questions that targeted specific knowledge in the domain of Saxon history and folklore, which put the students into a more active position than if they had only listened to the presentation, but rarely gave them the opportunity to contribute personal, unexpected answers. A task proposed by the museum ethnographer consisted of taking photographs of certain urban features or sites represented by professional photographers or painters in the past, to spot the differences and to comment on them. This assignment would be a welcome addition to the traditional history lessons, but did not correspond to the Photovoice approach. Time constraints and technical problems (some of the older paintings or engravings were taken from unrealistic perspectives and could not have been reproduced) prevented this idea from being realised during our project. While our collaboration worked perfectly well on the organisational level, and also as far as our common aim (the creation of two photo exhibitions) was concerned, our views on the best ways of implementing the agreed upon method could diverge at times.

A SCHOOL ALMOST LIKE ANY OTHER?

Initially, we conceived our invitation to students to explore their German-language school and what it meant to them as a "warm-up exercise." It proved particularly popular with the project participants who engaged themselves fully and with troves of imagination, having to deal with an almost deserted school building during "projects week." The photographs captured everyday impressions that showed how students appropriated or deviated the school day to their own purposes: drawing on school furniture, or using their mobile phone in secret. The motifs chosen expressed students' emotional attachment to the school – the lady selling snacks during the breaks, their pride of attending a school with a long history and tradition – as well as their ironic detachment at other moments: watching the slowly advancing hands of the classroom clock during overlong lessons, for example. Other photographs illustrated the pressure to perform, fear of being sent to the director's office and apprehension of the future. Viewed through the lens of the students' cameras, the Brukenthal school seemed to be a school almost like any other. Explicitly "German" or "Saxon" themes were certainly not the main focus of the students' productions in the school building. A student group found it noteworthy that German funds contributed toward acquiring some of the school's IT material, as attested by stickers pasted on computers. The school library contains beautiful old German volumes, which prompted another group to point out that the school gave them access to a rich cultural heritage (figure 15).

In the pre-project survey, students explained in detail where they thought the differences with Romanian-language schools lay: better organisation, discipline, cleanliness, quality equipment, international reputation, teacher involvement, modern teaching methods, more school exchanges, excursions and extracurricular activities. The school suspends all teaching during "projects week", as such, the project participants could not have illustrated this entire range of characteristics; their creations were often more personal and touching.

DEFINITION TROUBLE: GERMAN OR SAXON?

Concerning the main research question about the intimate experience and re-definition of ethnic boundaries in the context of a bilingual Transylvanian school, one of the rather striking, and immediately visible, results was an almost constant and pervasive confusion between the terms "Saxon" and "German" in the students' commentaries of their photographs. These two expressions are generally thought to refer to two different groups: "Saxons" are part of the small protestant, German-speaking minority in Transylvania with its centuries-old history, while a "German," at least in the general post-1945 definition of the term, needs to hold German citizenship. Saxon people may legally claim German citizenship on the grounds of their ethnic origins, and are "Germans" in that sense. Once they emigrate to Germany, native Romanians and their descendants can thus be both "Saxons" (as an ethnic category) and "Germans" (legally). Conversely, a German who was born and has grown up in Germany cannot become a Saxon, even if he or she chooses to live in Transylvania for many years.[8] For both (self-defined) Saxons and Germans, the distinction is clear.

Yet, from the Brukenthal students' point of view, and even when "half-Saxons" participated, the two ethnonyms seemed to be completely interchangeable, as became clear in several of the comments they wrote about their photographs. Many answers to our questionnaire confirmed this observation: students say that their school is a "German school," one student even believes that she lives in a "German town." When asked how many "Saxon or German" friends they have, typical answers are "I have no German friends," or "I have two German friends," without taking up the distinction between the two groups, Germans and Saxons. This conflation was not due to time pressure when filling in the questionnaire. Romanian has a word for "Saxon" (*saş* as an ethnonym, *săsesc* as an adjective), so that a missing category in most participants' native language cannot account for this particular difficulty. It has to be said that state officials and politicians often expose the public to an undifferentiated use of the term "German": the census includes an ethnic category called "German" (and not "Saxon"), and the minority lobby group which sends some representatives to the Romanian parliament goes by the name of "Democratic Forum of the Germans in Romania" (*Foru-*

[8] All informants, be they Saxons or German nationals living in Transylvania, agree on this matter. Non-Saxons cannot join the association/political party of the "German minority", according to its statutes. Paul Philippi, honorary president of the association, a retired university professor living in Sibiu, insists on the fact that language and customs are not sufficient to define Saxon identity; one needs to be part of a "community sharing the same fate" (Philippi 2010).

mul Democrat al Germanilor din România). In these two instances, people conflate Saxons with other German-speaking communities in Romania, such as the (traditionally Catholic) Swabians living close to the Hungarian and Serbian borders. But the project participants used the category "German" in an even more inclusive manner, obliterating the boundaries between Romanian and German citizenship, and making native language the paramount marker of difference and of belonging. On account of their common descent about eight centuries ago, i.e. long before the creation of the German and Romanian nation states, both "Germans" and "Saxons" speak different forms of German as a mother tongue.

Giving such an importance to one single token of difference very much annoyed a self-declared Saxon woman we met in one of the villages. When she challenged the students to explain the difference between her and myself, between "Saxon" and "German", project participants were genuinely unable to give an answer, showing their conviction that the two groups were identical. At the end of the project, several participants told us that one of the insights they had gained was new knowledge about "differences between Saxons and Germans" and "how Saxons are seen from a foreign, German perspective."

Whereas Saxons and Germans operate with a system of ethnic/national classification according to a number of criteria, such as official citizenship, residency, language, and descent, the project participants simplified the matter considerably. The indicator they pay most attention to, as their photographic productions and discussions show, is linguistic competence. Thus, by equating native language with ethnicity/nationality, young Transylvanians challenge the historically more sensitive, nation-state-bound vision that the elder generations endorse and which is taught at the Brukenthal school.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST

The paths of Saxons and "mainland" Germans ("inner" Germans, as Saxons often call them) separated more than 700 years ago, although the bond has never been completely severed (Schenk 1992:190). Was this interwoven history – culminating in the recent mass migration movement – of no interest to our young workshop participants?

The past became a dominant theme during our excursion to the villages surrounding Sibiu, where the recent changes had left more visible traces than in the town. We walked past abandoned Saxon houses, many of them in advanced states of decay, had sometimes difficulties in locating the keys for the abandoned village church, talked to the "last Saxon" in one village and met people who tried hard to revive the village community in others. As a consequence, many photographic productions of the participants capture a sense of nostalgia and ruin romanticism (figures 2-4). Saxon emigration was the basic predicament of the countryside, as the students discovered; they chose to photograph rundown buildings and broken objects covered in dust.

Whether in the town or in the villages, the dramatic reduction in size of the Saxon community, or in some cases, its complete or impending disappearance, was mostly recorded as a simple fact by our student participants. Many interpreted this change as the normal course of history, as illustrated by figure 5: student participants visualized time as a path leading from one iconic building to another, from the Saxon to the Orthodox

FIGURE 2 – DANDELION: THIS PHOTOGRAPH SYMBOLIZES THE EMIGRATION OF THE SAXONS. THE WIND HAS BLOWN MOST OF THEM TO OTHER PLACES – LIKE DANDELION GRAINS. THOSE WHO HAVE STAYED HERE REST IN THEIR GRAVES NOW. DIANA GÎNDILĂ, FLAVIA CRISTIAN.

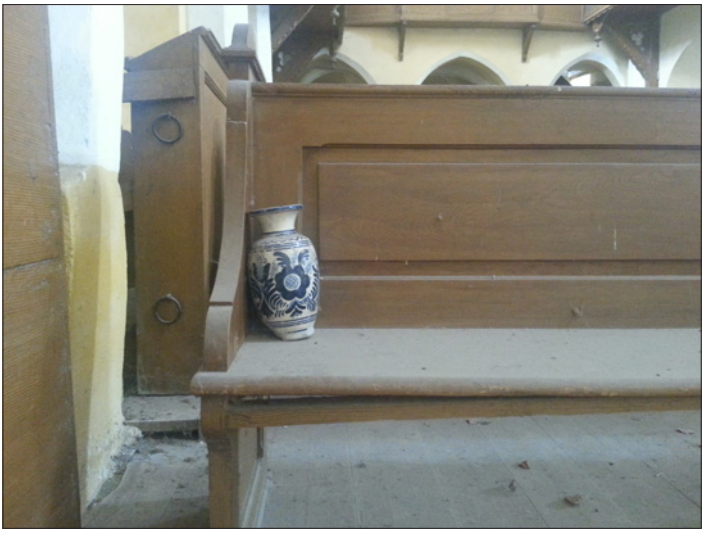

FIGURE 3 - I'M STILL HERE! THIS FORGOTTEN LITTLE BELIEVER LIES ON THE FRONT BENCH OF THE NEUDORF CHURCH. IT IS A PAINTED SAXON VASE THAT HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN BY ITS OWNERS. MIHAI CARABULEA.

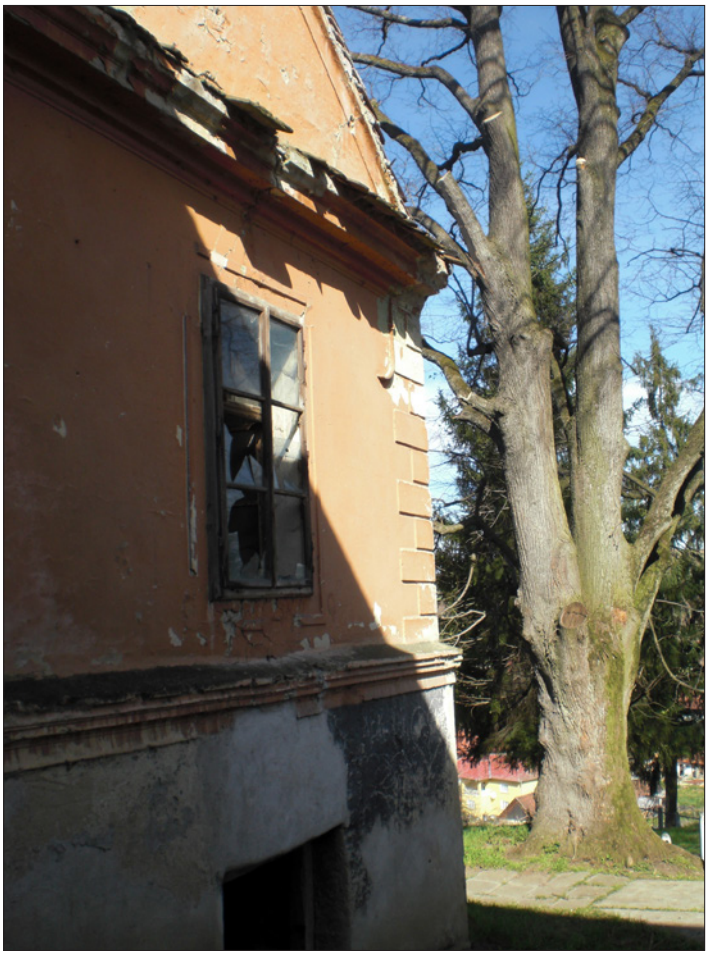

FIGURE 4 - BUILDING IN RUINS: THE BUILDING IN BURGBERG IS ABANDONED AND HAS BEEN ABOUT BY THE VILLAGERS, AND ALONGSIDE IT A PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE SAXONS. THIS IS SHOWN BY THE BROKEN WINDOW AND THE SHADOW THAT COVERS THE BUILDING.
CRISTINA MONICA ANDREI, ASTRID PASCU.

village church. Participants portrayed the replacement of one community by another as an almost natural change.[9]

Architecture and routes were popular topics for photographs both in the town and in the villages; the photographers wanted to represent the effects of migration and the material legacy of the Saxon community, such as in figure 6 (taken at Sibiu). When Saxon emigration was interpreted, or even mourned, as a loss for Transylvania, this feeling seemed to be triggered by the fact that many formerly Saxon houses were now inhabited by Roma families. These types of negative value judgements informed comments such as: "A village road in Rothberg: the houses in which Saxons used to lived are now used almost exclusively by Roma. The memory of the Saxons is overshadowed in the true sense of the word." Figure 7 is a variation on the same theme.These two project participants associated the Roma presence with a loss of positive values and used photographic means (light, shadow and colour effects) to express this view.

Remarks in the student survey clearly showed widespread negative opinions on Roma. Students see Roma as a harmful

[9] Two photographs compared "summer Saxons" (Saxons who have emigrated to Germany and bought holiday homes in Transylvania) with storks (leaving in autumn, returning in early summer), thus naturalising their absence to some extent.

FIGURE 5 - AN ORTHODOX CHURCH: THE DOORS OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH CLOSE BECAUSE THERE ARE NO MORE SAXONS IN ROTHBERG. AT THE SAME TIME THE DOORS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH OPEN.[10] FLAVIA CRISTIAN, DIANA GÎNDILĂ.

FIGURE 6 - THE TRACES OF THE SAXONS: THE PATH SYMBOLISES THE EMIGRATION AND THE PAST OF THE SAXONS. DELIA COȚOFANĂ, ASTRID PASCU, BENJAMIN RUOPP.

influence and a threat for the future of the country: Romania "was a beautiful country, but since the gypsies have arrived and given a bad image to foreigners, it is not beautiful anymore" (male student, 10th grade); the Roma "have a bad culture, gypsies have no respect" (male student, 9th grade); "in 50 years there will be only Roma left" in Romania (male student, 11th grade).[11]

[10] The photographers stand inside the Protestant church and look towards the Orthodox church.

[11] Some of the students clearly have their facts wrong. Roma have lived in Transylvania for many hundreds of years and were enslaved in some parts of Romania. To my knowledge, hardly any students of the Brukenthal school have Romani origins. If the students we worked with had more contacts with and first-hand knowledge about the Romani population of Transylvania, they probably would have avoided these kinds of comments.

The Roma obviously do not have the financial means to restore the facades of their new homes. As a matter of fact, moving into solid housing and from the village periphery into its centre is a considerable improvement for many families. In addition, even from a conservation standpoint, one may wonder if it is preferable to let the Saxon houses fall into ruins, and leave them completely unheated in the harsh Transylvanian winters, rather than have new dwellers occupy them in their own ways. However, project participants did not take up these alternative interpretations; the excursion into the villages lasted one day, which did not allow them to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-economic quandaries of the villagers. Students talked to people, but the focus was on photography and the expression of their own reactions to what they saw, rather than on the development of new insights on tangential matters.

The students documented that from their point of view, the Saxon past is almost gone, which they only seemed to regret when there was visible degradation of the rural architecture, a sad appearance of neglected church interiors covered in dust, or when it led to the social isolation of the "last Saxons" in certain villages. As the majority of Saxons have left Transylvania, the Saxons' importance now lays in the legacy that they have passed on to the remaining population.

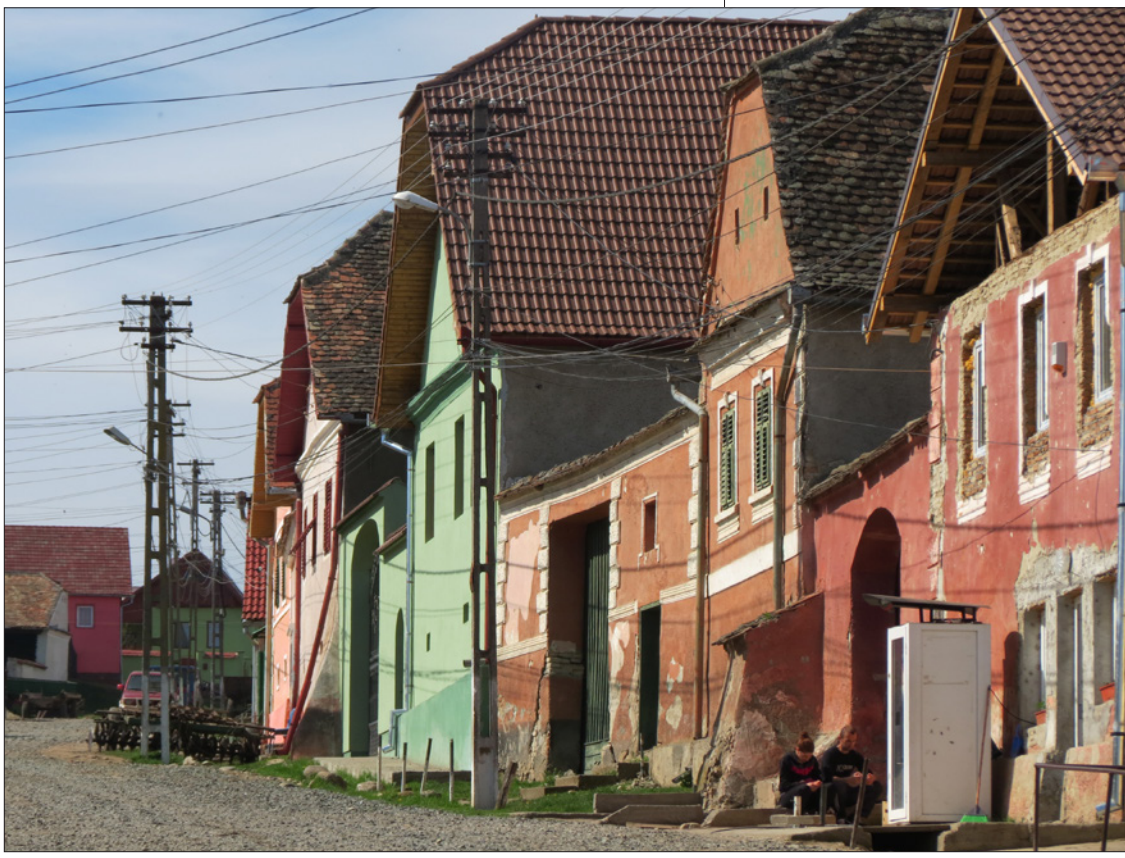

FIGURE 7 - THE COLOURFUL HOUSES SLOWLY LOSE THEIR SMILE: THE COLOURFUL HOUSES OF THE SAXONS ARE NOW INHABITED BY ROMA. THESE HARDLY CARE ABOUT THE HOUSES. RALUCA GHELBERE.

SAXON TRADITION: A LIVING LEGACY OR A COMMODITY?

Official accounts of the Saxon legacy include – *a minima* – the architecture of Transylvanian towns and villages with a former Saxon majority population, and other aspects of material culture, arts and crafts,[10] as well as institutions founded by Saxon communities: church parishes, schools, museums. But which, if any, of these seemed relevant to our student group?

In this respect, differences between participants with Saxon origins and "purely" ethnic Romanians became salient. As mentioned before, three of the participating students had Saxon family ties, i.e. at least one parent or a grandparent taught them German and handed down some family heirlooms. These students belonged to the protestant (Saxon) church, as opposed to their Orthodox classmates. When we asked the project participants to illustrate on what occasions they encountered German or Saxon elements in their everyday family life, only these three had stories about genuinely Saxon objects to tell. Their explanations included information about their family histories, the emotional value attached to handmade traditional decoration or clothing items, and the special occasions on which their families use these German or Saxon elements. For instance, one student photographed a pillow cover and explained: "It is handmade and very old, as my grandmother has inherited it from her grandmother. I will keep it to honour their memory and because of the value of Saxon things." Figure 8, the photograph of an old photograph, is another example. A third student produced a picture of his (Saxon) mother holding an embroidered bedspread, thus making it clear that there were not only Saxon "things" but also people in his home.

Once we finished the Photovoice project, this series of photos was to play a particular role. Two months after the photo exhibition in the school, the ethnographer/museum curator, who had appreciated the "modern" approach of the project, selected a small number of photographs to include in an exhibition. The curator planned the exhibition to document the contribution of all ethnic minorities to Transylvanian society and culture. About half of the chosen Photovoice photographs featured Saxon folklore, with a particular focus on traditional costumes. Of course, these photographs and the commentaries made about them were of great interest to us, too, as they gave intimate insights to everyone involved (not all students knew about their friends' family customs and histories). However, these "traditionalist" photographs were clearly an exception from the rule and not extremely representative of the Photovoice project as a whole.

In a rather extraordinary circular movement, one of the selected photographs showed puppets in Saxon traditional costumes that souvenir outlets offer for sale, such as the shop run by the ethnographic museum itself ("Saxon minions", figure 9). The students' comment referred to a Saxon dancing course at the Brukenthal school which is extremely popular with ethnic Romanians.

[12] The singularity of this Saxon legacy should not be exaggerated: Saxon traditional costumes and decorated household items are clearly influenced by the popular arts of neighbouring ethnic groups (Schenk 1992:65-66).

FIGURE 8 - MINIATURE COSTUME: ORIGINALLY, THIS TRADITIONAL COSTUME HAD BEEN SOWN BY HAND FOR A DOLL. I WORE IT WHEN I WAS THREE YEARS OLD, AND THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT I HAVE LEARNT ANYTHING ABOUT SAXON TRADITION. CRISTINA MONICA ANDREI.

In one of our discussions, a student explained her attitude toward Saxon dances: "I wonder if I feel anything at that. It's just dressing up. Once an old [Saxon] man came to me and simply cried. He told me that he knew the costume and that his wife had worn it once. And he simply cried." By means of contrast, the emotional reaction of the elderly man underlined the absence of emotional significance of Saxon customs for ethnic Romanian students.

Saxons of different generations disapprove of the contemporary afterlife of these former village dances which reminds them of a "carnival": from their point of view, young Romanians dress up as somebody who they are not, and give the – arguably – false impression that in this way people continue to embody and honour Saxon "tradition."

The ethnographer/museum curator managed almost the entirety of the second photo exhibition, with the teacher and myself only assisting in the writing of an explanatory note. To my surprise, they opened the exhibition in the presence of some of our group participants who dressed up as Saxons, displaying the costumes used in the dance class so as to fit in with the occasion (figure 10). The exhibition was not about all Transylvanian

minorities, including Roma, as the curator had announced at first, but only about Saxons and another minor German-speaking community. Only one of the volunteers at the opening ceremony had Saxon ancestry.

My first reaction was to view this choice critically, as it seemed to go in the direction of a certain reification of "Saxon culture".[13] Since the opening of the borders in 1989, and the mass emigration that ensued, Saxon émigrés, Transylvanians and tourists increasingly equate "Saxon culture" with visible and tangible objects such as pottery, costumes and other textiles which anyone can easily preserve, pass on, or carry away in emigrants' luggage, produce anew and sell to anyone else. Saxons living in Germany, tourists of all nationalities, tourism and museum professionals constantly participate in this commodification. By focusing on

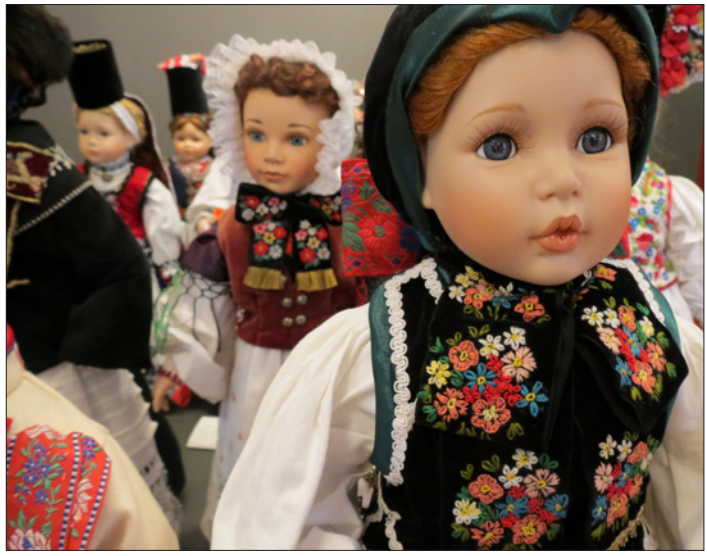

FIGURE 9 - SAXON MINIONS: ALTHOUGH THE SAXONS HAVE EMIGRATED, THEIR TRADITION LIVES ON. THERE IS AN OPTIONAL CLASS IN OUR SCHOOL IN WHICH STUDENTS LEARN SAXON DANCES. IULIA BOZOVICI, MIHAI CARABULEA, RALUCA GHELBERE.

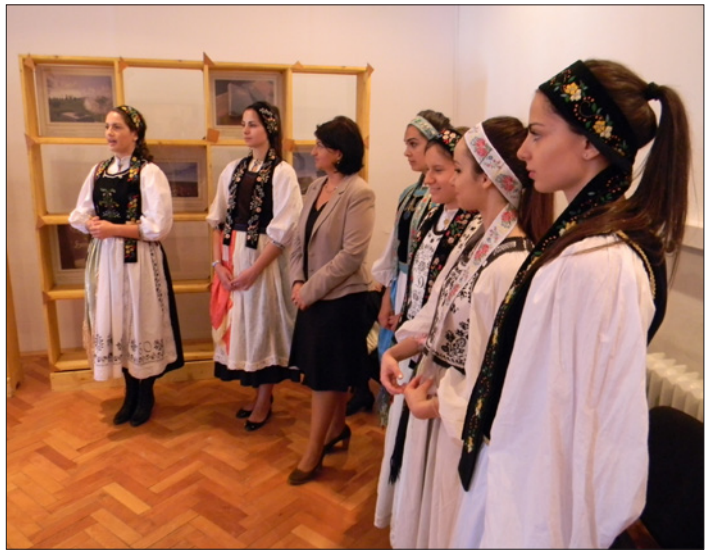

FIGURE 10 - OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION "LANDLERI PRINTRI SAȘI" IN THE MUSEUM OF SAXON ETHNOGRAPHY, SIBIU, 27 JUNE 2014 DIANA TATU.

material culture, commodification silences the significance of traditional Saxon institutions such as neighbourhood, fraternity and sorority groups, and the importance of the complex and interwoven social relations which made up Transylvanian Saxon communities before their disintegration.

The costumes that the students donned at the opening, together with the biased selection of photos, seemed to partake in this drive towards commodification. At first sight, the folkloric dresses, worn by ethnic Romanians in a 21st century town, seemed utterly "out of place" at the exhibition opening. Yet, as will be shown later on, we can interpret the students' choice in a rather different way.

SAXON LEGACY, GERMAN LANGUAGE: ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

When we asked the project participants to illustrate on what occasions they encountered German or Saxon elements in their everyday family life, most chose to photograph (school) books, tourist souvenirs from trips to Germany or German-made household items. The comments made it clear that they valued the supposedly superior quality of German brands, just as they appreciated the added value brought to their education by the Brukenthal school. Through everyday consumption habits, people associate Germany with higher living standards in purely material terms. While this is true for most Romanians, Brukenthal students are different in that, through education, German aspects also seep into their intellectual and cultural practices.

The idea of a German-Romanian "mixture" (figure 12) is noteworthy in that it also appeared in our pre-project student survey, albeit in a different context. A 16-year old female student wrote: "To my mind, Transylvanian Saxons are a mixture of Germans and Romanians. They are strict, but they also make exceptions." Similarly, a 17-year old explained their conviction that Transylvania shared in "the best of the two countries (Germany and Romania)." This self-positioning in a liminal space relates as much to the present situation as to future aspirations, as will become clear later on.

In general, a hierarchical view of everything "Romanian" and "German," from everyday consumer products, degrees of economic development, state governance to supposed behaviour standards, "culture," and "civilisation," was a consistent leitmotiv in students' commentaries.

When asked about their opinions about Romania and Germany, most students spontaneously defined the two countries by setting up a contrast: "Germany is an organised country. Romania is an unorganised country." "Germany is a very well organised and developed country. […] Romania is a country that is not very well developed." "Germany is clean, civilised, open to new things. Romania is dirty, uncivilised, 50 years behind." "Germany is a clean place with educated people. In Romania there is dirt in the streets, the country is governed by corrupt people." "Germany: good people, order, professionalism, clean-

[13] Visual anthropologists are increasingly aware of the risk that the images produced in research contexts can be misused as agents of cultural reification (Gubrium and Harper 2013:26).

liness. Romania: disorder, dirt, bad people." "Germany is the opposite of Romania. Romania is the opposite of Germany." Obviously, this "Germany" was more of an imaginary construct than a real experience: "I have never been in Germany, but I imagine that it is a beautiful, disciplined, organised country," said a 16 year-old girl.

Those hierarchically ordered associations also informed the photographic productions of the students in a subtle manner. For instance, students attributed everyday cleanliness and diligence to an alleged German/Saxon influence (figure 13).

Interestingly, a photograph of a museum courtyard (figure 14) triggered some debate among the students. The group chose to write the following commentary: "Order above all: This garden reflects German order." Some participants contested the implication that the Saxons or Germans designed this garden. The photographers defended their photograph

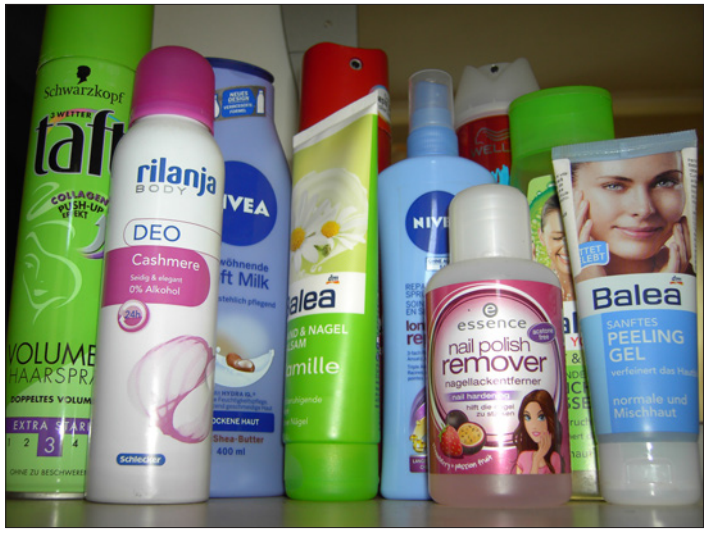

FIGURE 11 - EVERYTHING A GIRL NEEDS: ALL THESE ARE COSMETIC PRODUCTS FROM GERMANY THAT I HAVE AT HOME. YOU CAN BUY HIGH-QUALITY PRODUCTS FROM GERMANY IN THE SHOPS. DIANA GÎNDILĂ.

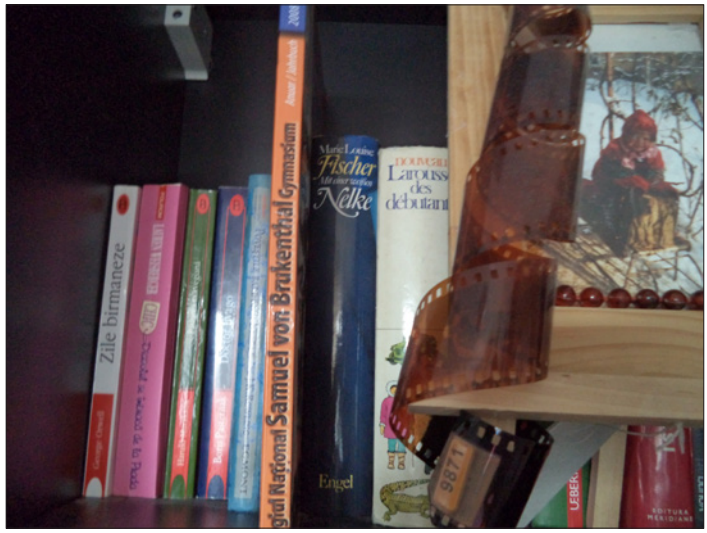

FIGURE 12 - ON MY BOOKSHELVES, IN MY LIFE: MY LIFE IS A MIXTURE OF GERMAN AND ROMANIAN ELEMENTS IN DIFFERENT QUANTITIES. ANISIA MANEA.

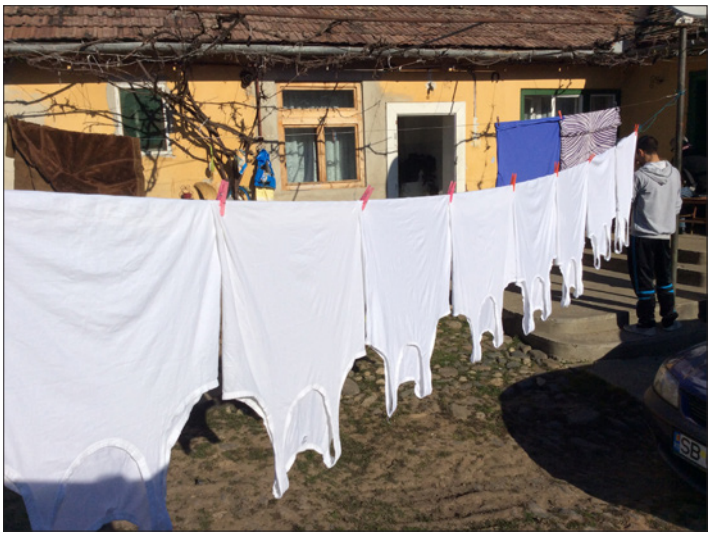

FIGURE 13 -ROMANIANS CAN ALSO WORK HARD: EVEN THOUGH THE SAXONS EMIGRATED LONG AGO, THEIR DILIGENCE IS STILL REFLECTED IN THE CLEAN HOUSEHOLDS OF THE ROMANIANS. CRISTINA COTOARĂ.

by saying that even if that garden in particular did not owe its existence to Saxons, they wanted to express the idea of Saxon-inspired order symbolically.[14]

The desolate state of a building bewildered a student group which had set out to take photographs in the office of a local German-language newspaper: "We expected there to be something big and perhaps also new, but there was a dacha next to it. We did not want to photograph it, there was dirt everywhere." Put off by the gloomy yard and entrance of the building, the students preferred to photograph a still life with the latest issue of the newspaper rather than to associate disorder and dirt with a "German" institution.

Another example was a photograph of German books in the school library (figure 15), or, even more explicitly, a photograph of an ancient Saxon manuscript in a museum: "The Saxons' gateway to knowledge: if we had lived some centuries earlier, we would have remained stupid."

As these examples show, students consistently ascribed a civilising influence to the Transylvanian Saxons. When asked in what ways Transylvania differed from the rest of Romania, they made explicit connections with the Saxon past: "Transylvania is better because the Saxons were here and they work with Germany"; "Saxons are the reason for which Transylvania is as it is today. They have improved a part of Romania." "Transylvania is the most beautiful part of Romania, one notices the German influence on the people and on the manner of organisation." "Many Saxons used to live in Transylvania. That's why it's cleaner and there is order." "Saxons have improved Transylvania a lot. They have transformed Sibiu into the best town in Romania." "Compared to the rest of Romania, there is a different mentality in Transylvania for we have contacts with other countries because of the Transylvanian Saxons and the German language. That's why we are different, we are more open-mind-

[14] The theme of "German" or "Saxon" order, as opposed to "Romanian" disorder, chaos and improvisation, has political resonances as well. In 2000, the Saxon mayor had been elected on a bet to "tidy up" the town after decades of "Romanian" rule, a task which he was apparently seen to deliver. Similar themes were developed in the presidential election campaign of 2014.

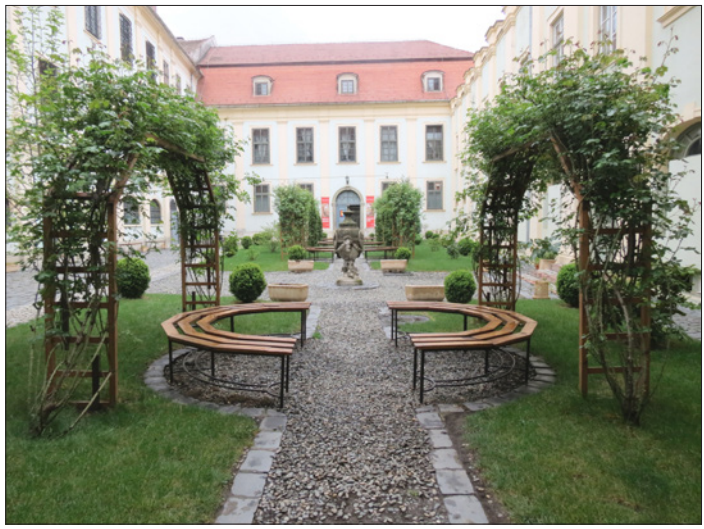

FIGURE 14 - ORDER ABOVE ALL: THIS GARDEN REFLECTS GERMAN ORDER. RALUCA GHELBERE, DIANA TATU, OANA VASIU.

ed." "Transylvania is so well developed because of the Saxons." "Transylvania is more like Germany."

Clearly, in the minds of many project participants, "Saxon" and "German" stood for something else, something different from and only remotely related with the German-speaking teachers, neighbours, friends or family members with whom they interacted in everyday life. On occasions, these ethnonyms took on significations that were independent from the actual presence of Saxons or Germans in Transylvania. The past did not necessarily relate to Saxon or German culture or influence, nor to the present condition of the region, but could even refer to visions of the future. A photograph taken by two students, and widely appreciated by all project participants, illustrates this particular aspect. Students see the German-

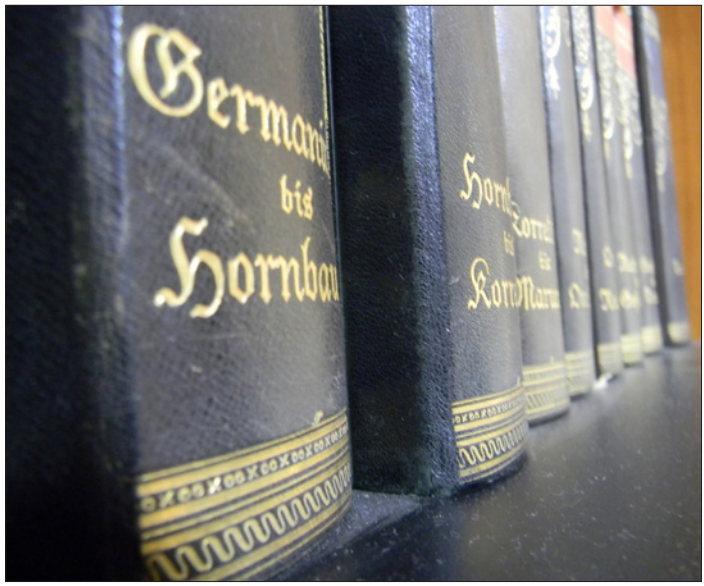

FIGURE 15 - HISTORY AND CULTURE: THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IS A PRECIOUS SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE WHICH IS AVAILABLE FOR EACH BRUKENTHAL STUDENT. CRISTINA MONICA ANDREI, BENJAMIN RUOPP, DIANA TATU.

language school as a pathway toward the world outside Romania, a keyhole through which students can glance into a future that will take them beyond the limits of their Transylvanian hometown. The photographers wanted to express that the value of German-language education lays in its opening of future possibilities. The survey confirmed this idea. Students talked about Germany as "a country in which you have many opportunities," "a civilised country where you can earn more money than here and where people treat you with respect," "a very interesting country where you can have a better life." In a way, students applied their individual career plans to the country at large: "We have to learn from the Germans for our future." "Germany is the perfect country. Everything is more correct than in our place." "Germany is a model for other countries." "Romania tries to be more like other countries, more orderly and more civilised."

The students portrayed Germans/Saxons as harbingers of "knowledge" and "civilisation" in the Transylvanian past and as purveyors of quality consumer goods in the present. What is more, an imagined Germany – a country of riches and opportunities, a clean, well-ordered, and rule-based paradise inhabited by educated, respectful people – has become an ideal that many students strive to attain individually and collectively.

WHAT MATTERS: ETHNICITY OR THE ECONOMY?

Read in conjunction with the statements made in the questionnaires, the keyhole photograph takes on an even greater resonance. Non-Saxon Transylvanian families pursue specific strategies in choosing German-language schools for their children. Foreign-language education is a project intended to open up international perspectives for young Romanians, prospects of higher education abroad, professional and material success.

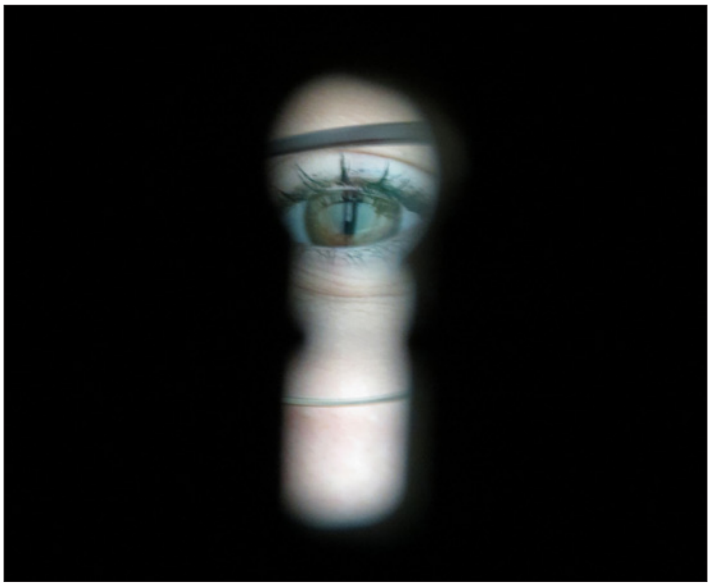

FIGURE 16 - A GLANCE INTO THE FUTURE: THE BRUKENTHAL SCHOOL IS THE KEYHOLE THROUGH WHICH WE SEE THE WORLD OUTSIDE ROMANIA. RALUCA GHELBERE, TEODORA SANDU.

In the questionnaires, many students were extremely specific about their career plans, indicating the names of universities where they planned to enrol after leaving the Brukenthal school. For instance, a 15 year-old student wrote that he wanted to study "computing in Munich," another specified "in Vienna, Austria, or Munich, Germany, probably medicine, ophthalmology," a 16 year-old had plans of moving to "Frankfurt because there is a Lufthansa training centre. I want to be a doctor or a pilot." A student in 11th grade stated that he wanted to "study medicine in Heidelberg and work in Stuttgart".

Socio-economic considerations seem to be paramount for the attractiveness of German-language schools. Saxon traditions passed on by the school have an importance for families with Saxon background, but they are not a central incentive for ethnic Romanian parents encouraging their children to apply for schools like the Colegiul Brukenthal. Similarly, all throughout the Photovoice project, but particularly in the villages, the participants subtly reminded us of the fact that while they were fully aware of ethnic differences, ethnicity was not an all-pervasive factor in their lives. In their majority, the project participants came from urban middle-class families. For the Photovoice project, they documented village life with a certain amusement, showing that they were well aware of the economic – and cultural – gap that separated them from rural Transylvanians, whatever their ethnicity (figure 17). Farm animals and child work proved to be particularly noteworthy. Back in Sibiu, a student insisted on telling us: "I have seen the difference between us and the people in the villages. A very big difference."

Interestingly, the project participants often thought outside ethnic categories; they did not particularly notice that the educational facilities for Roma children which we showed them were run by German or Austrian expatriates, and very much enjoyed interacting with the children above all. The photograph "Culture cocktail" (figure 18) captures the pleasure of playing with the young Roma villagers: "Children's games have a stronger influence than the boundaries between the three ethnicities: Romanian, Saxon, Roma". We can read this photograph as a call to relativize the importance of ethnic categories, underlining the fact that the idiom of ethnicity could hide other interests or considerations.[15]

DISCUSSION

This final part of the article discusses the results of the Brukenthal Photovoice project, assessing its contribution to the understanding of the ethno-linguistic configurations in present-day Transylvania, as well as examining a number of questions the project raises with regard to the methods applied.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMODIFICATION?

As shown by the students' motivations for choosing the Brukenthal school, the aspect of Germanness or Saxonness

[15] Cf. Brubaker's, Loveman's and Stamatov's call not to take the universal salience of ethnic categories for granted (Brubaker et al. 2004:46). The relative lack of importance of ethnicity, outside of conflict situations, was confirmed by Brubaker's research in the Transylvanian town of Cluj (Brubaker 2006). While many students pointed out differences between "Germans"/"Saxons" and "Romanians" in the survey, others insisted that "we are all the same."

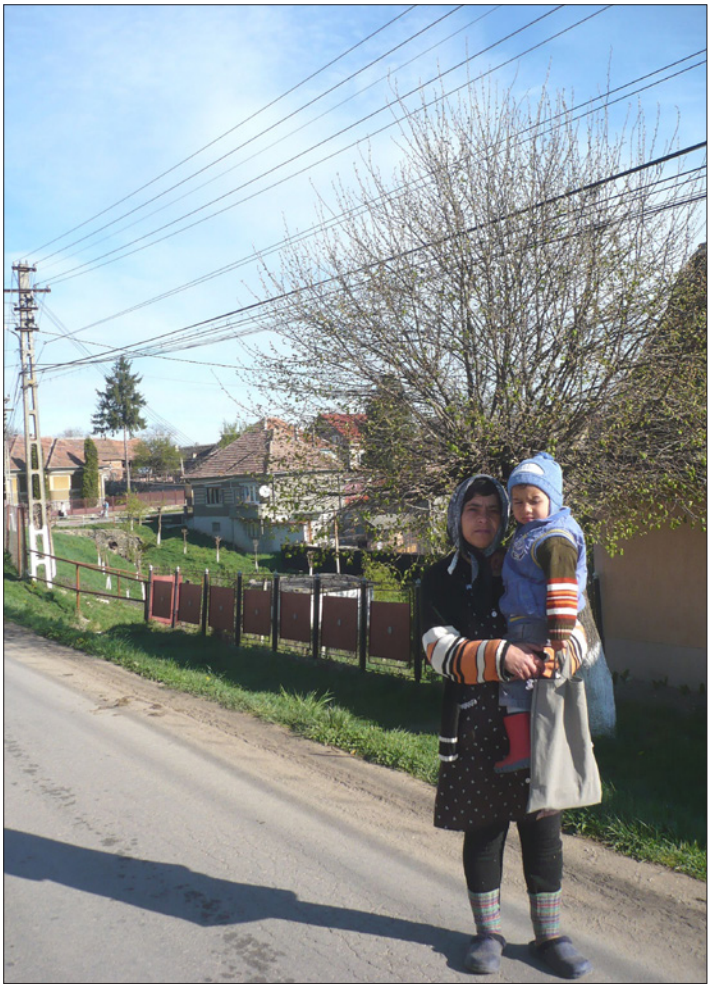

FIGURE 17 - DIFFERENCES: PEOPLE IN THE VILLAGE OF ROTHBERG ARE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE IN TOWN AS YOU CAN SEE IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH, TOO. YET I HAVE NOTICED THAT HAPPY AND OPTIMISTIC PEOPLE HIDE BEHIND THOSE DIRTY OLD CLOTHES. THEY WERE NOT AFRAID TO SHOW ME THEIR BEAUTIFUL SMILE AND TO BRIGHTEN UP MY DAY THIS WAY. TEODORA SANDU.

that is most highly valued in Romania, and that Transylvanians regardless of their ethnicity can and often want to acquire, is the German language, in as much as it guarantees a good secondary education in a selective school as well as access to German-language universities later on. German skills maximise young people's chances of entering a more lucrative section of the job market, even within Romania. Hopes for a better future, aspirations for upward social mobility hinge upon German language proficiency, and the positive valuation of anything related to Germany is contingent upon this linguistic-cum-economic strategy.[16]

The answers to our survey showed that the plan of getting access to more lucrative labour markets through investment in language skills goes hand-in-hand with a hierarchical vision that ascribes economic and organisational superiority to Germany, as opposed to "underdeveloped" Romania.

Arguably, this more metaphorical than real "Germany" serves as a metonomy for another loaded geographical concept that has made a come-back in post-1989 public debate in Romania.

[16] According to the 2011 census data, 1.1 million Romanian nationals live abroad. Other estimates amount to 3 million. Most émigrés are young, urban, and skilled (OECD 2014: 290). One Brukenthal student stated in the questionnaire that "everyone wants to leave".

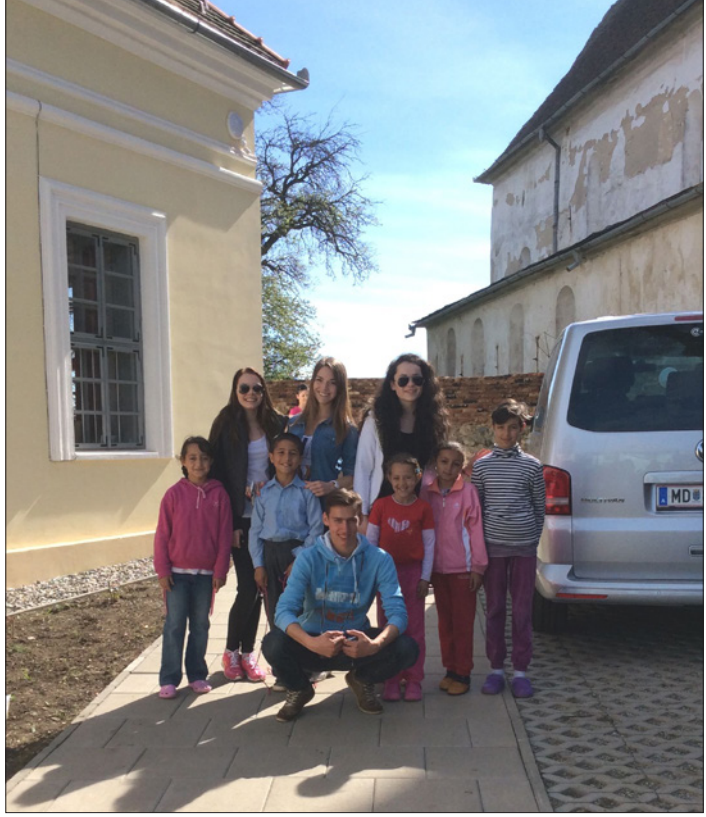

FIGURE 18 - CULTURE COCKTAIL: CHILDREN'S GAMES HAVE A STRONGER INFLUENCE THAN THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE THREE ETHNICITIES: ROMANIAN, SAXON, ROMA. CRISTINA COTOARĂ.

As several commentators have analysed, "Europe" stands as a cipher for progress, an economic benchmark or improvement ideal, a coveted alter ego, possibly even a civilizational and political utopia never to be realised, but nonetheless considered to be worth striving for (Heinen 2013; Maner 2013; Vidmar Horvat 2012). Like this imagined Europe, the "Germany" that many Brukenthal students have in mind is partly a distortion (Hann 2012:91), rather than an accurate representation of economic and political realities, but this distinction hardly matters to the people concerned. Many students strive for German language proficiency and some degree of acculturation to what German standards are supposed to be because this increases their social prestige and economic opportunities. By stressing their particular relationship with the German language and Saxon influence in their history, Transylvanians can also position themselves as more "European" and less "Balkanised" than Transcarpathian Romanians.[17]

Pro-German choices have an economic and political subtext. This also adds a layer of meaning to the folkloristic show at the second photo exhibition that sprang from our Photovoice project and that I found so bewildering at first. Probing into what led to this peculiar presentation at the ethnographic museum made it possible to understand that the "dressing up" as Saxons was a revelatory incident rather than an anachronistic error. Listening to the project participants, it became clear that the dresses and dances are the only elements of "Saxon"/"German" culture that the bilingual Brukenthal students can adapt rather easily, apart from the German

[17] Incidentally, a few months after the Brukenthal Photovoice project, the positive German/Saxon stereotype swept all over Romania when Klaus Johannis was elected president, promising to deliver high-quality work. Unsurprisingly, Johannis obtained his highest scores in Transylvania, the big cities and in the diaspora.

language. I learnt that the initiative to wear these dresses was theirs, and they proudly do so whenever they publicly display the presence of their school in the town, such as at the annual May festival. Unlike kinship, family history and name, which cannot be changed and nobody wishes to change, language skills and dress can be acquired voluntarily and, crucially, they may co-exist with other choices: students switch effortlessly between Romanian and German, between modern international and traditional Saxon (and on occasion Romanian) dress. While making German nationals wonder and smile, and triggering astonishment and sometimes criticism among Saxons, the traditional costumes, which only German-speaking students can wear, position them in the Romanian context close to anything German, thus enhancing their social prestige.[18] Dancing or publicly speaking in Saxon costumes, ethnic Romanians testify as much to their present educational commitment as to their future ambitions.

Germany and Romania, or "Europe" and the "Balkans," constitute the main dichotomy that informs students' comments on their personal projects as much as their assessment of Romania's economic and political situation. This observation also sheds light on another conundrum mentioned before, i.e. the constant confusion between "Saxon" and "German". In a binary east-west, or rather northwest-southeast scheme, there is probably no need for an additional ethnic boundary between Germans and Saxons. This particular distinction is essential to Germans and Saxons themselves, being aware of what separates them, but bears little practical importance for the young ethnic Romanians who participated in the Photovoice project. Saxon history lessons are part of the school curriculum, but students hardly remember their content. Faced with this indifference, the school does not act as the "vector of memory" that it could theoretically be. For the generation born after 1989, the present and the future clearly hold more interest than their region's or a specific ethnic group's history.

Through the Photovoice project, these young Transylvanians taught us that the boundary that matters most for them is a linguistic one, language being the key to geographical and social mobility. Regardless of formal citizenship, the categories that they use divide their social environment primarily in German-speakers and Romanian-speakers, with themselves moving freely from one side to the other. Thus they sketch the outlines of a post-national world, catching up rather unexpectedly with Transylvania's pre-national past.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM A SLIGHTLY UNORTHODOX PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

MIXED METHODS

The Brukenthal research project deviated from traditional Photovoice methodology in several ways. We opted for a cer-

[18] Similarly, Jean and John Comaroff (2009) have demonstrated that the increasingly prevalent "ethno-commerce" or "identity industry" can also have emancipatory effects.

tain degree of methodological eclecticism, combining the photographic and explanatory work of the project participants with a questionnaire. As we show in the article, this survey often helped to spell out what were mere allusions in some photos or comments and might not have been noticed otherwise. The questions had a broader scope than the Photovoice work in the sense that they dealt with students' social relations, educational history, opinions and attitudes that went beyond everyday experience. Many of these issues would have been difficult to capture by means of photographs. Compared to the Photovoice project, the questionnaire reached more respondents and could thus help to assess the representativity of the project group sample. Only volunteers participated in our project, with ethnic Saxons (or "half-Saxons", as participants would put it) being over-represented compared to the overall student population of the school. Partially, the questionnaire also compensated for the shortness of the actual Photovoice project, which had to take place in a very intense form during a single week, instead of spreading out over a longer time-span.[19]

On the negative side, presenting students with a questionnaire during a school lesson, as my collaborator and co-project organiser did some months before the Photovoice project, puts students in the situation of a typical school exercise (the teacher hands out documents to be filled in). Once we finished the Photovoice project, some participants told me that they sometimes just write down anything in response to questionnaires because they have to. This "confession" showed that some measure of trust had been established during the project, but it also raised the question of reliability of the questionnaire data. With regards to surveys, or indeed any task proposed by a researcher, how can we tell apart what is sincere, from what is only written, said, or photographed to please us? Clearly, personal relations are indispensable to gauge the authenticity of participants' contributions.

Finally, even if filled in with utmost honesty, questionnaires will always favour the more articulate and literate individuals in the target group. The mixed methods approach allowed us to cater for two different kinds of literacy, one purely verbal, the other more visual.[20]

PHOTOVOICE IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT: WHAT DOES "PARTICIPATION" MEAN?

Working in a school context and across an age divide, we could not disrupt the inherent power asymmetry at all times during this particular Photovoice project. At the very beginning, before fully assimilating the Photovoice approach, students expected to be "taught" something. The project co-leaders could not always resist the temptation to "teach," even if this only took the form of gentle feedback on some photos or comments.

What is more, it proved inevitable for some coercion to occur. The project took place during the week preceding the Easter holidays; other Brukenthal student groups had travelled

[19] Many Photovoice projects are fast-paced; even one-day events are possible (Gubrium and Harper 2013:36, 75). In our case, the students' interest might have waned over a longer time period.

[20] For a balanced appreciation of mixed methods research cf. Creswell (2011) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2011).

abroad with their teachers while we regularly came across students from other parts of Romania who visited Sibiu during the "a different kind of school" week. Given this "almost vacation" atmosphere, our participants' work ethos was rather impressive. But given a choice, students would have preferred to start later and finish earlier on most days. After 4 pm, a certain restlessness set in, some students would leave the group even if the work at hand was not finished yet, or call their parents to fetch them when we were far from the town centre.

As mentioned earlier, we did not realise the full extent of student participation in the part of the project that entailed the final selection of photographs for the two exhibitions, even if this happened on the base of a mutual agreement. Left to their own devices (which they did not want to), students would probably have choose more "cute" and "funny" photographs of piglets, other farm animals, village children and themselves. Conversely, the history teacher and myself were not involved in the selection of photos for the exhibition in the ethnographic museum. So was this a project with imperfect participation? And does it matter? In all honesty, the answer to both questions must be affirmative – with a caveat. More student participation would have led to a different exhibition, but not necessarily a more interesting or an aesthetically more pleasing one (and perhaps it would not have been presentable on time). Most importantly, the project participants did not wish to be more involved and preferred to leave some of the organisational work and decision-making to the adult co-leaders of the project. Looking back, not only on the final stages of the project with the frantic preparation of an exhibition that made everyone proud, but also on the previous days, one notices that there were different degrees of participation depending on the individuals, the tasks and the times of the day concerned, as is probably true for many, if not most participatory visual research projects.[21]

THE LIMITS OF "COMMUNITY"

Ideally, there should be an almost complete concordance between the concerns and objectives of Photovoice participants and those of the project organisers. The latter identify with the difficulties of the community members, provide them with the tools that help them to express their points of view and to propose solutions to given problems so as to reach audiences that can make a difference.

In our case, finding a common focus was sometimes less obvious. On occasion, the project co-leaders would not entirely agree on what was interesting and important, as evidenced by the difference between the two photo exhibitions.

Ambiguous roles (teacher/project facilitator) caused some occasional dissonances and caused rather productive tensions. Lack of planning or prior consultation was not a factor as we took care to be in constant and open communication before, during and after the main part of the project. More importantly,

[21] Similarly, Alicia Blum-Ross reported that the East London students participating in her video project were unequally involved during the postproduction phase (2013:97).

the collaborators' differences in outlook reveal an underlying conceptual problem: to what communities did the participants and the organisers belong, and what community was the immediate audience of our research project? The learning and teaching community of the Brukenthal school? The Saxon minority? The linguistic community of native German speakers? German speakers with Romanian citizenship, whatever their ethnicity? Or non-native German speakers only? Was it the multi-ethnic community of inhabitants of Sibiu, or perhaps of the wider region? Depending on the answer, different group participants, organisers, and photographed people would find themselves either on the inside or the outside of the community. Given the complexity of the ethnic and linguistic situation, there could not be a clear-cut response to the question. We can best visualise all these communities as partly concentric, partly overlapping circles.[22] Implementing a Photovoice approach was a particular challenge in these circumstances.

PHOTOVOICE WITHOUT ACTIVISM?

The project participants hardly qualified as "passive victims" (Harper 2012:202), which intensified the challenges of the project. Compared to typical target groups of Photovoice projects, the Brukenthal students enjoy social privileges and have hopes for a future in which their educational efforts pay off, literally speaking. Admittedly, the empowerment aspect was subtler in this context, but one would be mistaken to assume that it did not play a role at all.

Insisting on discussions and written comments on each photograph selected by the students, we encouraged them to express and defend their choices and opinions, which is rarely the case in traditional school lessons. The school director listened to and read through the comments on the students' learning experience and visibly took them to heart, giving his point of view on different matters. The exhibitions were an object of pride and could be showed to fellow students and family. At the end of the project, we delivered colour-printed attendance certificates with official logos, stamped and signed, which could enhance the students' CVs if they wished. Thus, capacity-building took place in various ways, but not always in a manner that we had anticipated. For instance, it proved to be unnecessary to provide the students with the second-hand digital cameras that I had brought to Romania; some brought high-end photographic equipment with them, and others had all the technical skills needed to transfer photographs from different kinds of digital support to the school computers and to assemble slide shows for the group discussions.

While the students did not need any technical help, we could guide them in other respects: how to manage the digital information overflow that they tended to produce; how to use photography as a means of expression; how to argue their case when selecting and commenting their "best" photographs; and, how to arrange their photos for the purposes of an exhibition.

[22] For a problematized assessment of the "community" concept, cf. the volume edited by Gerald W. Creed (2006).

With digital photographic devices becoming ever more affordable, and perhaps more importantly, integrated in the millions of mobile phones owned by people with very modest resources, Photovoice projects are probably less and less concerned with giving access to technology, and might increasingly concentrate on helping people put their already existing photographic skills to political uses.

Working with rather privileged, or at least not particularly disadvantaged, participants shaped the project in yet another way. Rather than exposing oppression or injustice, we explored everyday experience and identity issues with the main aim of making an unheard group's views known, of generating and spreading new knowledge. Our Photovoice project differed from most in that the activism element was less prevalent. Researchers use participatory visual research to help groups express their identity without claiming any public action apart from recognition. Yet methods such as mapping techniques, video diaries or digital storytelling (Fine 2012; Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006; Prosser 2011:487), as well as in-depth interviews might be more adequate means for pursuing these research interests further, once the Photovoice approach has opened a discursive space, as it undoubtedly did in the Brukenthal project.

CONCLUSIONS

Methodological eclecticism is clearly a path worth exploring, particularly when the full Photovoice canon cannot be applied. Ideally, researchers can combine the strengths of different approaches without jeopardizing the participatory ethos of Photovoice.[23]

In the case of the Brukenthal project, the combination of a visual with a more verbal-oriented method proved to be fruitful. The participant's productions, examined in conjunction with a careful analysis of the survey results, relativized the importance of ethnicity and underlined the impact of socio-economic concerns. The project also helped to learn more about the young Transylvanian generation's attitude to the past. In post-socialist countries, memory is said to oscillate between nostalgia and repudiation of the socialist era (Light and Young 2015).[24] Both attitudes imply value judgements about history. By contrast, the young Romanians who participated in our project displayed rather neutral feelings about the past. Born after 1989, they have witnessed neither the revolution nor the immediate transformation period. Indirectly, they benefit not only from Germany's soft power strategies to enlarge its sphere of influence in the East (by funding German-language schools), but also from Romanian policies under socialism. Romania was the only Eastern European country to preserve German-language schools, while creating a climate of insecurity and scarcity which motivated Saxons to leave in their thousands, "making place" for ethnic Romanians in their schools.

[23] For instance, questionnaires may be more participatory than ours was: community members can elaborate, administer and analyse by community members surveys by themselves.

[24] With "excision" or denial of the socialist era as a third option, particularly in official discourse in post-1989 Romania (Buchowski 2012:80; Light and Young 2015:225)

There is an uncanny parallel with the village Roma we met: the departure of the Saxons gave both groups, rural Roma and urban ethnic Romanian families, an opportunity to improve their situation to some extent, although they are at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum. In the post-post-socialist era, after EU accession and economic liberalisation, ethnic identifications seem to matter less than the "good life", however defined: attainment of individual goals, social prestige or material success.

Where does this observation leave the Saxon community? The new Brukenthal students will not swell the ranks of the ethnic German minority, at best they are objective allies who appropriate the Saxon heritage by performing it in their everyday lives: dancing, wearing costumes and speaking the language. With time, Transylvanians will probably not see these performances as second-hand, less authentic imitations, but as a new tradition which expresses this generation's specific subject position.

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