

Report on Intersession Activity

**Alina Branda,
Department of Cultural Anthropology,
Faculty of European Studies,
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj**

This report is basically on the Research Project, the Last Two Workshops, the Students Team Activity, the Teaching Activity. It also includes some General Comments on ReSet project.

Note: The first excerpt of my report is actually a very broad presentation of the proposed research project (that I have sent to CCRIT, in autumn). I paste it below as I think it can offer a better image of what we have intended to do and what we have achieved.

Topic : The Jewish Community of Cluj-Napoca. Forms of Identity Construction

Brief Description of the Main Steps/ Goals of the Research:

We will try to focus on the cultural peculiarities of this group, its mechanisms of self representation.

From the very beginning, it is of great help to contact some leading persons of the community, who are able to offer us general information on it. They could also facilitate some other relevant contacts in the Jewish community.

This is, I believe, extremely important as our research is going to be carried out in an urban area such as Cluj and only this way one can get some important preliminary hints on the topic.

At the moment, we have some very general steps/goals of our research. They are the following :

I.The first one is to approach the laic(al) dimension of this group. At this level, we try to focus on the main institutions that represent it, having a certain relevance in the life of the Jewish community of Cluj. More precisely, we intend to find out those institutions and then, to observe and analyze how exactly they function. The point is to see the ways in which they gather this group

II.The second one is to assess the ways of defining their own identity through religiosity (how the things are at this level, nowadays). Participant observation at different ritual celebrations might be a starting point in approaching such an issue.

III,The third one is to notice and analyze other events in the community that could have a relevance in what concerns our topic of interest .

Methodology:

As I have mentioned from the very beginning, it is important to get in contact with some leading persons of the community and to interview them, in the effort of finding a path of access to this group.

Participant observations (1) of different, non religious events, organized by the community (2) of different forms of manifesting their own religiosity (3) of other events with relevance in what concerns our topic of interest are absolutely compulsory in carrying out such a research.

Interviewing persons who belong to this group, in order to see which are their views and understandings of all these manifestations, is another important step of the research.

Fieldwork

From the very beginning, we have got in contact with a few of the leading persons of The Jewish Community from Cluj, trying to find a path to get an easier access to it. Following this idea, we have had some preliminary discussions with the current leader (“Chief of Community”, G.V.) who is University Professor at the Department of Mathematics.

We all have found these discussions of great help, as they have given us a sense of what we are supposed to do, where to start and how to proceed.

More precisely, he has suggested us to contact an old member of the focused community, known as “the memory” of the group. His name is V.G. and he has been one of the editors of a literary magazine in Cluj for many years.

He proves to be indeed a great informant, facilitating us other connections in the Jewish Community of Cluj, offering certain ways of access to it, giving us a sense of orientation in the “field”.

I. As I have mentioned in my first research project, our first goal has been to approach the non-religious dimension of this group, focusing on the ways it is represented by certain institutions, their role in gathering and expressing the community.

1. Following this path, we first have identified an organization of the young Jews - OTER – in fact a national organization with a department in Cluj, which is quite active.

Its role is to offer a chance to young Jews to learn and preserve their traditions. There are several meetings organized in this frame, informal talks on certain issues regarding their own identity, conferences, Hebrew language courses and so on.

At this level, part of the research team has participated in such meetings, getting in contact with a few members of this group, interviewing them in a second phase.

2. We have also understood that a choir of the Jewish Community currently functions in Cluj. This is, I would say, another “institution” we have spotted in our effort to approach the issue of our research. It is formed mostly by young Jews, but not only. Although its activity is permanent, they have regular meetings during the year, it tends to be more active when a celebration (religious or non-religious) follows. The research team also contacted some of the members of the choir, interviewing them.

3. The community has also administrative offices, a few members of it being in charge with the problems regarding this issue: preservation of goods, the

community inheritance. It has been also one of our tasks to contact these persons and to obtain some information from them.

Mainly we have focused these three “institutions”, meaning three ways in which this small Jewish Community (about five hundred people, including mixed identities) currently manifests.

II I also have mentioned in my first research project that another goal of our research is to approach the ways of defining Jewish Identity through religiosity.

Following this idea, part of the research team has done participant observation on the occasions of Hanuca, Ros Hasana and Purim, when the most important part of the community has gathered in the Synagogue from Horea street.

As a second step, when interviewing a few of the members of the community, those we have already quite well known, we have asked about their peculiar ways of understanding religiosity, of relating to it. Our idea has been to see to which extent religiosity is important in defining their own identity.

Focusing on these institutions and the activities related to them, we have finally got a sense of how the community is represented at the moment, how it functions, which are their current internal mechanisms, to which extent they are different and changed compared to the past and so on.

Related to our intention to find out the most functional institutions that have relevance for the community life, we have also spotted the main places, areas of Cluj, where the above mentioned activities take place. All of them are situated in the very central part of the city (David Francisc str, Paris str, Croitorilor str and Horea str.). Interviewing several old members of the community, we even could reconstitute a mental map that includes places with relevance for the life of this community in the past: Synagogues (that have been replaced in time by other buildings, with different usages or having nowadays other destinations: Casa Transit, The Transit House, a cultural place at the moment; on the same side of the river Someș, quite near the location of Casa Tranzit, another Synagogue has been

placed in former times, that one designated to Orthodox Jews; another one on Croitorilor Street, which currently belongs to The Department of Jewish Studies, BBU).

Apart from this religious places, there are some others, still in the memory of a few old members of the community: The Ritual Bath, again in the central part of the city; schools, high-schools that have functioned as such in the interwar period, hospitals, graveyards.

Knowing both the places that are functional at the moment, in the direct administration of the community of Cluj, identifying also those that are in the memory of a few members of it, we have a sense of continuities and discontinuities that have affected this group and I believe, a better understanding of the current status of it.

There are a few achievements and also some ways to continue our work that I want to emphasize:

1. We have found some paths of access to the community, getting in contact with a few members, identifying the informants, interviewing them (I would say that it hasn't been an easy task, considering that the fieldwork has been and still is carried out in an urban area such as Cluj)
2. We have managed to identify the main functional institutions of the Jewish community from Cluj and we have observed how they function and which is their relevance in the process of self representation of this group
3. Interviewing few old members of the Community, we have got some information regarding also the past of it, having an understanding of the elements of continuity/discontinuity past-present.
4. We have a representation of the religious and non-religious life of the present Jewish Community from Cluj.

We would very much like to continue our research project, focusing on the memory of this community and also its religious life .

***Note:* The whole research project has been carried out in a team (with 4 students with a special interest in Cultural Anthropology) Before starting our fieldwork, we have had some preliminary discussions, mainly about what we are supposed to do and how, where to start, which are the main goals of the project.**

My impression is that the main benefit for the students has been the experience they have acquired in using specific anthropological methodology (participant observation, interviewing informants, writing fieldnotes).

Workshops

The last two workshops had been organized as followed: *One of them* was based on discussions with students (the four members of the research team) about the whole project: the reviews and summaries they were supposed to send to CCRIT, the topic that we had chosen, the reasons for this option.

Mainly, we tried to organize the fieldwork that we had to carry out: distribution of tasks (focusing on certain institutions and places, ways of collecting data). We also tried to establish regular meetings in order to comment on the information we got and to decide which were the next best steps to be followed.

Briefly speaking, it was a quite informal meeting, but extremely necessary for developing in good condition the whole project.

The second one gathered a few of RESET colleagues and it focused on the developing of critical thinking of students: strategies of implementing it, its importance. Everyone had presented personal didactic experiences in this respect. We had as guests Professor Eniko Magyari- Vincze and Professor Marius Lazar, both in the staff of the program Teaching Anthropology. Means and Meanings, who shared with us their personal views on this issue, giving us some suggestions.

The Students Team Activity

I tried to have a good, permanent connection with my students that formed the research team:

- we had a few discussions about their role and duties in the framework of the project (I announced them about the reviews or summaries they were supposed to send, we decided together which was the best schedule for all our common activities, we shared these activities)
- as I previously mentioned, we had regular meetings, in order to analyze the data we got from fieldwork
- I invited them to participate in some of the meetings of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology, in the effort to offer them information about other anthropological research projects and to keep up their interest in the field.

Teaching Activity

This year, specifically the first semester, I led the seminars on Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, Anthropology of the Cultures of Transylvania (both of them had been given in the framework of the MA program in Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj)

Comments on ReSet project.

First of all, ReSet project facilitated us the contact with reputable specialists of the field. We had the opportunity to benefit from their academic experience and meanwhile from their experience as fieldworkers

In this respect, all the activities scheduled in the framework of the project made these things possible: the first summer school, the process of supervising the experimental research projects, participation of a few of them in our workshops.

On the other hand, we had the opportunity to work, especially in what concerned the research projects together with other ReSet fellows. In this frame, we could share opinions, which was again a great benefit.

Meanwhile, the work in team (together with our students) was of a great benefit : the fieldwork was carried out easier, the discussions with them helped me a lot in my didactic activity (I understood better which are their doubts, demands and interests, assuming that these are more or less the same for other students).

Last but not least, I became really interested in my research project and I definitely want to deepen it in the near future.