

Author: Zoltán ROSTÁS
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Review by:

In the 80's Zoltán Rostás carried on with a project he designed in the late 70's, while studying the works of the sociological school of Dimitrie Gusti. Despite the historical, social and political context of the final decade of the Ceausescu's dictatorship, which would certainly reject this approach (methodologically and ideologically), the author tried to insert into the sociological research qualitative methods based on long interviews with persons that were selected only through the intermediacy of personal acquaintances.

Zoltán Rostás admits that his project lies somewhat unfinished. He tried to get a picture of the multiethnic city of Bucharest as it resulted from the life histories of old people who could narrate of the many aspects of the city from the interwar Romania (or even from the beginning of the 20th century). The 16 long interviews expose different perspectives from various ethnic or social points of view. We are offered the voices of Germans, Hungarians, Jews, a Romanians, Armenians, Romanians, Greeks, Russians, but also the opinions of workers, manufacturers, servants, civil activists or the descendants of great noble families of historical personalities. As a great project as it may seem, the author regrets the absence of other groups: Gypsies, Italians, French, etc.

Some of the informants were past 100 years old, and others have died short after answered the mild questions of Zoltán Rostás. The feeling of witnessing to the last echoes of a world and a time past, which are evaporating together with their last survivors, is hard to be ignored. Even if we may have the impression of revealing the ruins of a multiethnic Bucharest that exists no more, we must accept that nowadays the same city is also an heterogeneous one, but laid on different categories (one can find fewer Jews, Germans, Hungarians, French, etc. in Bucharest, but can easily discover more Chinese, Arabs, Turks, etc.). The point is that the strategies of interaction, communication, self-fulfillment or survival developed in the past century, sometimes in the harshest realities, may provide a reservoir of useful techniques to deal with the "Otherness" in the present-day Romania.

Andrei Pippidi identifies in the foreword to this book some of the qualities of the entire project. First of all, there is a refreshing free-flow of the interviews, "naturalness" in the succession of ideas, greatly helped by the social abilities of the author. Other reason for considering these life histories real documents is the fact that they are genuinely expressed, spontaneously, without the help of quotations from books to support assertions. There is to be remarked the respect of the author for the sources of information, proved by the fact that he did not try to "correct" the dates, conserving the forms of expression (which vary function of the education, the social status, the native tongue, etc. of the respondents); in fact, these inexactitudes of language insert spice into the text. Another aspect underlined by Pippidi is that people coming from ethnic minorities are over represented as related to Romanians. But, as the author said, he did not try to accomplish a study based solely on sociological methods; that is he did not try to respect a quantitative sampling. He did not want to prove any theory or to bring accusations to a certain ideological order (it is to say that he deliberately avoided blaming the socialist regime in Romania, a fact that obstructed the printing of the book in the early years of post-socialism, when all references to that period had to prove the atrocities of the red abomination). Personally, I think that this is the most interesting and pleasant aspect of

the project: its preoccupation with “small” life histories of ordinary people, freed from personal emphasis or ideological militancy that are to be found in the case of public figures.

Not necessarily a weak point of this work, but sometimes a reason for frustration coming from the reader is the fact that the interviewees are sometimes “brought back to the tracks’ (i.e. the question of multiculturalism) and the stream of memories (which derail in stories that do not involve this issue, but are delightful, nevertheless) is cut off, ending pleasant stories from times past. Obviously, the author is not to be blamed, but rather the short space of only one book. I think that other books could be written starting from any of these life histories.

A great work in the field of oral history, accomplished in a period when this discipline was still at its beginning and suspiciously looked upon by the Romanian academe, “The Faces of the City” is a useful instrument (containing information and methodological tips) also in sociology and anthropology. The merits of this book do not reside only in its utility in the fields of social sciences, but in the fact that it becomes more than an instrument while reading it – it becomes a sample of the past lives and worlds. Zoltán Rostás’s book is worth reading twice: once for the professional interest and once for the sake of its (subjective) authenticity – you can feel history breathing through its pages.