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Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

THE DEMOGRAPHIC EVOLUTION OF THE
TRANSYLVANIAN SAXONS IN THE MODERN EPOCH

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Key words: Transylvania, Saxon population, modern epoch, historical demography, reconstruction of the families, fertility, mortality, natural growth, emigration, demographic transition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our aim in this study is to point out the influence of the typical modern epoch changes – political, economic and cultural – or simply circumstantial events, on the demographic evolution of the Saxon population, on one side, and to find out some answers related to the mechanisms of this evolution, on the other side. The first part of the study will therefore be focused on the quantitative coordinates of the Saxon's community evolution, pursued in the chronologic evolution revealed by the censuses of the epoch. In the second part of our attempt, the emphasis is laid upon the processes that took place within the life generating matrix itself, at the micro level of the community, family or individual. It is there that we shall try to find answers, reconstructing the history of each family in part, drawing tabels, statistics and patterns. Demography, being a profoundly statistical science, the present attempt will be tributary to the constraints of operating with mathematical formulae, percentages and abstract values. Still, whenever possible, real characters will be brought in front and displayed, from behind the numbers. This is not due to the fortuitous wish to bring about a picturesque or trustfull element to the argumentation, but out of the conviction that, only the understanding of the way the family reacted to the outside stimuli, can explain the population's dynamics at the communitary or regional level. Our main goal is therefore, to write a history of the evolution of the Saxon population, from the perspective of its families.

The 1850 census marks the beginning of the statistical approach of the population matters. This census, together with the next five, until World War I, represents the primary data base for the first part of the present work¹. Though there were in fact seven censuses, the one from 1869, could not be used, because at the time we built our data base for this dissertation, the full version², including the data of each locality, hadn't been published

¹ Traian Rotariu (coord.), *Recensământul din 1850. Transilvania*. [București], 1996 (în continuare - Rotariu, 1850 - the same for the other volumes of the series); idem, *Recensământul din 1857. Transilvania*. [București], 1997; idem, *Recensământul din 1880. Transilvania*. [București], 1997; idem, *Recensământul din 1900. Transilvania*. [București], 1999; idem, *Recensământul din 1910. Transilvania*. [București], 1999; Josef von Jekelfalussy, *Orts-lexikon der Länder der Ungarischen Krone*. Budapest, 1892 (în continuare – Jekelfalussy, 1892).

² Traian Rotariu (coord.), Mezei Elemér, Maria Semeniuc, *Recensământul din 1869. Transilvania*, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008.

yet, and when it was published, all the estimations and statistics had already been done. We replaced this shortcoming by another source of information. Starting with 1863, the Evangelic Consistory from Sibiu, published an *Statistisches Jahrbuch der evangelische Landeskirche A. B. im Grossfürstentum Siebenbürgen*, providing every five years statistic data on the Lutheran Church from Transylvania, according to archdeaconies and localities. This is the source of our the demographic information for 1869.

As for the second part of the work, dedicated to the case studies, the main data source is represented by the legal status registers, including lists with the baptized, wedded or deceased from the parishes under investigation. In the attempt to do a compromise between the need to be relevant and the limited processing capacity in fulfilling this work, we operated a selection, and chose three localities: Vermeş, Feldioara and Velț. The three communities have some common characteristics for which we chose them for this study. First, they belong to different regions, offering thus a minimum coverage of the entire area populated by the Transylvanian Saxons. Vermeş belongs to the Northern Group of the German habitat, around Bistrița, Feldioara is illustrative for the South-western Group, with the centre in Braşov, while Velț belongs to the great Southern Group, with Sibiu and Sighișoara as main urban places. Second, they provide from the point of view of the demographic dynamics, a quite trustworthy pattern for the area they belong to³. We can thus, extend the the results we will get from the analysis of these communities, to the entire area. Finally, not a less important aspect is their dimension, that is the dimension of the Saxon community of each village. Taking into account, that the working method implies a thorough reconstruction operation of the families from the three localities, a reduced number of population, naturally implies a reduced quantity of work, therefore a higher efficiency, so that the spare time can be used rather to analyse the data base than to built it.

We did consider it proper to pursue the demographic evolution of the Saxons, on localities. The main idea for this decision , was the possibility of a more efficient control over the information. We consider it necessary just because of the changes in the census criteria along the period of time under investigation. Except the 1850 census, the following ones never mentioned the nationality of the inhabitants as such, but only their religion and/or their native language. This called upon some small adjustments of the values, especially for the localities from the Northern Group of the Saxon University, namely

³ Except Velț, in opposition with the evolution of the population, at the administrative level to which it belongs, but even in this case, on long term, the similitude is re-established.

those situated in the present Bistrița-Năsăud county. The adjustments were necessary because there were two disturbing factors. On one side, the characteristics of Bistrița area, where the gipsies from several places with Saxon population declared they belonged to the Lutheran Church, and on the other side, the Jews from the same area, more numerous after 1850, who declared German as their mother language.

In the second part of the work, dedicated to the case studies, the main method was the reconstruction of the families, from the parish registers. We do not insist anymore on this work technique, as it has already found its place in the Romanian historiography, Sorina Bolovan's book broke new ground in this respect, being at the same time a perfect guide for the description and application of the method⁴. For each of the three localities, in calculating the fertility we used a method detailed within the respective chapters. We did the same in the case of the other methods we took over from the specialized references.

II. DYNAMICS OF THE SAXON POPULATION BETWEEN 1850 AND WORLD WAR I

Between 1850 and 1910, the inhabitants of Târnave Plateau, the Land of Bârsa or Bistrița, went through epidemic diseases, natural disasters, economic conflicts and heavy taxation. For a mainly agricultural population, the drought years, the flood, the hail or the damages caused by pests, meant poor harvest and poverty. In spite of all these changes and troubles, they went through, along the six decades under investigation, the Saxon population grew by 18%, reaching from 174,606 persons in 1850 the number of 205,000 at the end of this period of time. This growth in absolute figures, hides in fact a decrease in the German population within the whole population, from 8,4% to only 7% in 1910. This diminishing trend in the entire German population can also be found in Hungary, where the Germans got from 13,6% in 1880, to 10,4 % in 1910.

The 18% growth between 1850 and 1910, mean very little, if we compare this value with the 40% growth in the whole Transylvania, or the 48% growth in the Cisleithania population. How can this modest evolution of the Saxons be explained? This was a question for the Saxon authors of the epoch, too, one of the answers pointing out eight causes: the climate conditions (!), general hygiene deficiencies, deficiencies in looking after the children and the aged persons, abortion, early marriages and endogamy, the lack of vital space and emigration. All these causes may be included into three categories:

⁴ Sorina Paula Bolovan, *Familia în satul românesc din Transilvania. A doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului XX*. Cluj-Napoca, 1999.

improper hygienic-sanitary conditions, enabling a high morbidity and mortality rate; an unhealthy mentality on marriage and procreation; economic causes. Some of these determinations can be proved, others can hardly be found in the historic reality. Emigration, for example, though an obvious explanation, rather puts up than solves questions. As we have seen in the subchapter dedicated to this issue, the regions with fewer emigrants, both in relative and in absolute figures, have the most important population decrease. It also remains obscure the role of the emigration in keeping a negative, but relatively small migration rate. The question also brings about the arguments related to the volunteer control over the birth rate, or the endogamy practice, as in these cases, the demographic reality interferes with an ideologically motivated discourse. The danger of the disappearance of the German blood in Transylvania, or keeping the health of the race are but some of the more and more frequent issues for a part of the Saxon elite, at the beginning of the 20th c.

Beyond all these objections it is certain that all the above mentioned factors contributed more or less, to stop the numeric development of the Saxon population. There still is another purely quantitative element, in the population increase or decrease: the sheer number of the Saxons. 200,000 persons means relatively little for the entire province, representing only 7% of the inhabitants, in 1910. Any change in the demographic balance, within a section of a certain population, leads to more perceptible consequences in a smaller population. This is the case of the Saxons. The natural negative birth rate in the Seats of Sighișoara, Rupea and Cincu, during the 6th decade of the 10th c. prevented an increase of population, between 1850 and 1857, while at the beginning of the 20th c., the poor growth of population in the Northern Group and Brașov area, significantly diminished the demographic growth, in general.

All these differences in the demographic dynamics, caused, in my opinion, a non-typical development of the demographic transition in the Saxon population. If Transylvania, on the whole, fits into the classical pattern – decrease of mortality, followed at a certain gap of time, by the birth rate decrease⁵ – in the case of the Saxons, the two indicators have almost parallel trajectories. Both the birth rate and the mortality decrease at the same time, the result being a more modest demographic increase than in the Romanians or the Magyars. We shall see furthermore, on the results of a detailed analysis, what type of demographic transition we are talking about, and which were in fact, the implied

⁵ Cf. Ioan Bolovan, *Transilvania între revoluția de la 1848 și Unirea din 1918. Contribuții demografice*. Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 158.

factors.

III. CASE STUDIES

We have seen in the first part of the thesis which are the main, important stages of the Saxon demographic evolution and the way they are involved within the frame of the changes along the history of Transylvania, between 1850 and 1910. But, beyond the general historical context of a certain population and the consequent conditions, beyond the events and circumstantial phenomena which may influence its dynamics, we are mostly interested in the changes within the primary core of the demographic phenomena. Meaning the family, its attitude to its own destiny, the way it manages its own resources, its answer to the changes of the environment were it comes into being, grows and disintegrates.

This is the role of the three case studies, that is to enable our access in the protected area of the domestic unit. The data thus obtained for these communities, for the families belonging to them, are the most elaborate device we can dispose of at present, for the analysis of the demographic phenomena in the Saxon area.

What are the main results? Generally, from the analysis at the community level, there are four aspects, marking the evolution of the population under investigation. First, the two children family system has been proved. Although, as we have seen, this practice represented, as the whole question connected with the population's reproduction and health, a major interest and a constant concern for the contemporaries, who considered it as a widely spread practice in the Saxon villages, it seems to have been limited, geographically, to the Northern Group of the Saxon communities, while in time, to the last decades of the 19th c. and especially the next one. That it could have been existed in some other places or previous times two children families, is a fact beyond any doubt. But we can not speak at all about a system, a systematic, volunteer practice of this reproductive behaviour. However, the data about Vermeş, as well as other similar research⁶, do indicate exactly this. We must point out, that in spite of the large practice of this system, the decrease at the same time preceding and attending the mortality, enabled to keep the natural birth rate within positive limits, even if at too lower values, to fully compensate the emigration movement. This is why Vermeş, like almost the whole Northern Group, had annual negative rates at the beginning of the 20th c.

Speaking about mortality, we shall go on with this subject, as one of the important

⁶ Bogdan Crăciun, „The Saxon family between ideology and demography”, în *Transilvanian Review*, vol. XII, nr. 4, 2003, p. 45-61.

conclusions of this study. In all three localities under investigation, mortality began to decrease starting with the 8th, 9th decades of the 19th c., the main contribution to the process, being that of the young age groups. The diminishing mortality process had already been pointed out since the discussion on the population's dynamics, when we also analyzed the natural movement of the Evangelic population. We have seen then, that both mortality and birth rate had an almost parallel evolution, with a decreasing trend. Unfortunately, the statistic data at hand, did not allow the extrapolation of the statistics before the 8th decade. This became possible in the analysis for the second part of the study, on the three communities. We could thus estimate both the initial moment of the change and the behaviour of the different age groups. The gradual decrease in mortality would correspond to the first stage of the classical pattern of the demographic transition. According to this pattern, after a period of inertia, when the birth rate kept the characteristics typical for the old demographic conditions, it also started to decrease. As shown by the data on the natural movement of the population and partly confirmed by the detail analysis, the two phenomena developed almost together, the mortality decrease being accompanied by a similar evolution in the birth rate. This was the case in Velț, where fertility decreased in the 80's, a period when the decrease rate in children over 5, diminished; it was the same in Vermeș, where the decrease trend was obvious in both indicators, ever since the beginning of the period under investigation. Only in Feldioara, things were different, the processes in this case developed after a pattern closer to that of the classical demographic transition. It is obvious that the mortality rate in children decreased during the 70's, followed after two decades, by a decrease in fertility. What lies in fact, behind this seemingly demographic transition?

This question leads us to another element worth mentioning. Both birth rate and fertility, at the province level, the indicator in the case of the selected communities, have a significant decrease trend. Leaving aside Vermeș, with its special situation, due to the family system which anyway implied the strict limitation in the number of children, both in Velț and Feldioara, fertility decreases earlier, in the first case, or later in the second. However, in the estimation of this evolution, we must start from the same premises as the families did in the old demographic system: the chances that the patrimony and name of the family should be carried on, were in accordance with the number of births. It was a question of survival and, at the same time a probability calculus. This is exactly what the Saxons did. Women gave birth to 5-6 children to be sure that at least 3-4 will reach maturity. Meanwhile, the risks of the childhood period decreased, leading naturally to the

growing number of the successors. But families did not accept the change and therefore made everything in their powers to keep the status quo: they limited the number of births, but not also the final dimension of the domestic group. The final number of children for both localities, remained over 3/family. This fact had two consequences: one, for the history of mentality, the other directly on the demographic development. First, a number of 3 or 4 children per family, was not enough to support the ideas of a modernization in the Saxons' attitude in relation with the traditional values of the home. Indeed, after 30 or 35 years of marriage, the Saxon women stopped and gave up the joy of maternity. But this was not due to their emancipation and desire for modernity, but because they were loyal to the tradition and insisted on growing up the same number of successors as their grandmothers. Second, from the point of view of a population that attempted to a (quantitative) prosperity, is completely irrelevant how many children are born within it, main thing is, how many survive. In our case, 3,5 children/family is a most comfortable value for any patriot worried about the fate of his nation. The threat for the future of the *Sachsenland* came not from the mothers from Feldioara or Velț. Another phenomenon with demographic implications was responsible for the slow process of the Saxon population, a phenomenon that represents the fourth element of these conclusions: the emigration.

In the first part of the study, we pointed out the extension of the phenomenon and the costs for the Saxon population. But, beyond the direct effect, caused by the temporary or permanent leaving, of some tens of thousands of persons, the secondary effects must also be taken into account, with their demographic implications. For instance, the economic effect of the emigration has to be emphasized. The possibility of building and supporting a family depended to a great extent, on the capital gathered by the emigrant and reinvested in land, farming machines or animals. Then, all this period of absence could be a cause for either a delay in building a home, or a change in the reproductive behaviour, when the whole couple emigrated. Concerning the first question, which would have led to reduce the woman's fertile period, thus influencing the fertility, the calculated data for Feldioara and Velț do not indicate a growth in the marital age. We may therefore presume, that the majority of the emigrants were already married persons, who, as we have seen, not rarely left together with their partner. Still, we do not have statistics on the marital status of the emigrants, as we do not have data about the fertility of the couples in the new location.

In the side effects chapter, we should also mention the cultural influences, which the even superficial contact with a different world could have had on the emigrants, and, consequently, on their private behaviour. Regardless of the place, be it Brașov, Romania or

America, the change of the cultural horizon, the confrontation with other scale of values, couldn't have left prints in the Germans' conscience, having the abroad experience.

Still, in connection with the emigration, or the population's mobility, a distinction must be drawn between internal and external mobility. We have already spoken above, about the external one, that is the emigration itself. But, when considering the data from Feldioara and Velt, the conclusion is, that besides the American emigration, or that to the south of the Carpathians, the individuals' movement within Transylvania's borders had also an important effect on the dynamics of the population. We have to admit, that we couldn't find a clear, unequivocal, solution neither to this question, nor to others within this study. However, our information indicate the internal migration as main cause in the decrease of Feldioara population, during the first decade after 1900. The same goes for Velt, between 1890-99, but in this case this is a mere hypothesis.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

At first, the main objective of the present study was to draw the major directions of the Saxon's demographic evolution, between the 1848 Revolution and World War I. This aim was reached, in the second chapter, dedicated to the dynamics of the population, according the six⁷ successive censuses. Still, we came to the conclusion, that the Saxons followed the general trend of the entire population of Transylvania: two growth stages, interrupted by the 70's crises. But, with two differences. First, the slight growth in the 6th decade, at the province level, became in the case of the Germans, a slight decrease, having strictly geographical causes, and whose explanations concern epidemic episodes, within a general, unfavourable framework. Second, the growth of the population, after 1880 which was still constant at the province level even at the beginning of the 20th century, lost its rhythm, in the case of the Saxons. This can be proved very clear by the data in Annex 3, resulting that the annual average growth rate, which between 1880 and 1900 had been at higher values than 0,5%, decreased between 1900-1910, to 0,16%! In this case, too, the explanation was at hand, the over 30,000 Germans who left Transylvania after 1900, acted as a powerful brake in their demographic evolution.

Leaving aside these minor rhythm differences, the attention was especially drawn in this global analysis of the population's evolution, by the demographic behaviour of each region. The large scale of scenarios in the evolution of the German population in different

⁷ Seven, if we take into account the statistic of the Lutheran Church from 1869.

geographic areas, between 1850-1910, is surprising. Even if we do not take into account the territorial units with a very small number of localities, and hence with non-significant percentage of inhabitants (Orăștie, Solnocul interior, Făgăraș, Sebeș, Turda), we may still point out seats as Miercurea or Sibiu, with annual average rates of over 0,5%, but also places like *Nösnerland*, or the seat of Sighișoara, where in 1910 were fewer Saxons, than 6 decades before!

Consequently, we have an apparently homogenous population, confronted with the same historical reality, but with different ways of reaction to the stimuli, or the context. In order to define, at least partly, the type of reactions of this community, we chose an inductive approach, starting from the basis, from the family and community, to see the way they answered to the changes along the period under investigation.

It was the balance or lack of balance of these three elements – mortality, fertility, migration – that the evolution of the population reconstructed here, mainly depended upon. The question is, if beyond the demographic parameters of this evolution, all the above data are of any help in the better understanding of the society whose quantitative history we have tried to reconstruct? I believe they are. I believe they are, because now, we can at least make the difference. We may draw a border line between society and family. And this is so, considering the problems exclusively from the perspective of the present study. The decrease of the mortality or the increase of the population's mobility, beyond the borders of the province, are a unquestionable indicator of some more profound changes. Transylvania on the eve of World War I is not anymore Transylvania from 1848. We may call this evolution modernization. But, in spite of the fact that the Saxon family is naturally affected by these changes, it does not become modern. The real constant fertility, the situation of the divorce, the attitude to the civil marriage enable us to make this statement.