



Creative Work

A brief history of the Vlachs in three poems

Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković*

Introduction

The three poems tell the story of the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, from their settlement in this region more than two centuries ago, up to this day, when they are facing forced resettlement and complete erasure of their villages due to ecological destruction. The first poem describes how the Vlach shepherds crossed the Danube River on rafts with their sheep and families and settled in an unknown land where nobody spoke their language. The second poem focuses on the electrification of the Vlach villages in the second half of the 20th century, which brought light but dissipated the magic contained in Vlach spells. The third and last poem shows how the Vlachs' environment is today being destroyed by aggressive mining and how their language is slowly dying. The poems, with inserts in the archaic Romanian variety that the Vlachs speak, mirror a dialogue between the researcher and an elder member of the community, who is trying to pass on his knowledge to the researcher. They stem from the author's more than 20 years of linguistic and anthropologic field research in the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia.

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They crossed the Danube with their sheep

you ask me if I remember the old tales of my ancestors
the wise old man murmurs
a sad grim hanging from his lips
I dream their tales every night
at dawn I cross the Danube with their sheep
over and over
and never drown
I climb the mountains and touch the sky

* Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Serbia.
Email: annemarie.sorescu@bi.sanu.ac.rs

then fall quiet
they said their fathers' fathers fled the land of yesterday
beyond the forest

Trans-sylvania

where everybody spoke their language
but did not dream their dreams
they cut the forest
and lashed together rafts
loaded wives
children
and bleating sheep
to cross the big water
into the land of today
when they arrived
the place was empty
roosters had not crowed here for 50 years
beeches were so thick
seven men could not encircle them
they put foot and hoof on strange ground
and followed the herds with a heavy heart
their small sturdy sheep gave scant milk
but needed no salt for months
after stormy days
lonely weeks
and hungry months
they arrived at the mountains and started climbing
it was a difficult path
overgrown with nettles and thorns
but the stubborn sheep pushed onward

oacheșă

bucălaia

breaza

after seven years and seven days
they reached the top and touched a sky
so clear it hurt
no dust
only stunned light
and 77 mountains beyond
they stayed
they raised pens for their sheep
huts for their families

pipes to blow their sorrow in
see girl
you may understand our words
but you can never measure
the weight of our grief

Let it be light

you ask me about my childhood
the wise old man mutters
the shade of a smile
flickering across his cheek
my grandmother was a sorceress
and our house was always full of people
who came for help
in the evening
she would light a candle
not to banish darkness
but to speak with it
she gathered her faithful plants
made the sign of the cross
through the trembling air
let a prayer fall from her lips
then cast her spells
de deochi
de izdat
de întors
she could turn back the evil eye
send sickness wandering
to the black forests of the land of yesterday
urge a destined lover to run faster toward your door
call stolen milk home to the sheep's warm udder
whisper with the *ursitoare*
and soften death into a gentler dark
but one day
our folks grew afraid of shadows
they wanted light instead of whispers
so my father was sent away
to learn the language of wires
current
and light bulbs

when he returned
our house filled again
this time with people standing at the threshold of tomorrow
my father went to Moşu Ion
at the far end of the village
climbed a ladder beneath the wooden roof
to fix a single bulb in place
below him Moşu Ion held the ancient oil lamp
its flame small patient
already losing ground to the night
when the electrical light came alive
sudden strong unwavering
they all burst into joy
hands clapping
laughter spilling
faces lit as if it was noon
but my father descended in silence
he reached for the old lamp still breathing its fragile fire
turned toward the new light
made the sign of the cross
then he kissed the glass and said
his voice breaking
“forgive me
for I am fighting against you”
he lifted it high with both hands
then cast it to the earth
bang!
see girl
you understand our language
but you will never hear our whispers
in the dark

When the shovel struck, gold and silver leapt from the ground

you ask me what remains of our sheep and our land of today
the wise old man sighs
a tear hanging from his eye
first the makers said our sheep were too small
too little milk in their udders
too little meat on their bones
they spoke of the improvement of the breed

of making it larger
more productive
they came with a ram
broad as a storm
leading him from pen to pen
forcing their great future into our tiny ewes
ah the sorrowful love life of sheep in socialism
what grew inside them
was too large
for the narrow gates of their bodies
life became a burden no womb could bear
one by one
our sheep perished
splitting the mountains with their cries
cursed be that day!
trees withered with sorrow
grass wilted with pain
earth cracked dry with grief
then the makers returned again
to see whether anything precious
still slept beneath our feet
when the first shovel struck
gold and silver leapt from the ground
like cursed light
soon our mountains

Starica

Tlva Roš

trembled with the roar of engines
iron beasts arrived
tearing open what had slept for centuries
the makers bought our houses
our yards
our gardens
pushed us to the edges of our mountains
then farther still
to distant places
where we would learn every language but our own
slowly forget our songs
and the shape of our grief
listen girl
my hand is trembling now

my sight is growing dim
I will not be here much longer
you who still understand our words
must write our story down
before the eternal sun rises over the land of today

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Author's bio

Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković is a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. She is a linguist and anthropologist specialized in Romance-speaking minority communities in the Balkans, and her current research interests encompass language contact, language endangerment and revitalization, ecolinguistics, and environmental humanities. Her PhD thesis dealt with the mythology and folklore of the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia. Her recent publications include the co-edited volumes *Linguistic and Semiotic Landscapes of South-East Europe: Insights from the Serbian Border Regions* (Peter Lang, 2027), *Vulnerable and Endangered Languages in Europe* (Institute for Balkan Studies/University of Belgrade, 2025), and *The Romance-Speaking Balkans: Language and the Politics of Identity* (Brill, 2022), as well as the co-authored monograph *The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia: Language and Society* (Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2023). She has recently started writing poetry inspired by her decades-long fieldwork in the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia.