CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE

The origins of the Romanian people are hotly debated and the answers, unfortunately, have been over-politicized.

It is now generally accepted that the language of the Romanians is a neo-Latin language. This was not a matter of dispute for those familiar with the Latin tongue. Nevertheless, there were some people who questioned this fact, mostly for political reasons. For example, Serbians living in the Banat at the beginning of the nineteenth century, denied the Latin origins of the Romanian language, because they did not want the Orthodox Romanians living in Hungary, and who were under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Serbian archbishop of Karlóca [Sremski Karlovci], to leave the Serbian-led church organization. On the other hand, Romanians demanding an independent religious organization attempted to “prove” their Roman origins in order to bolster their position. In the second half of the nineteenth century, great excitement was generated by the Romanian linguist, Alexandru Cihac, who called attention to the frequent occurrence of words of Slavic origin in his etymological dictionary, published in 1870. He estimated that such words amounted to 40 percent, and only 20 percent of the words were of Latin origin. (According to his estimates, the words of Hungarian and Greek origin came to 20 percent respectively in the Romanian language.) As Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu pointed out, however, Cihac did not consider the fact that words of Roman origin occurred more frequently in the living language and literature. (To counter Cihac’s view of language based on statistics, Hasdeu devel-
oped a “theory of word circulation,” in which he emphasized that the characteristics of a language are determined by the frequency of the occurrence of individual words.) In fact, in contemporary Romanian, words of Latin origin amount to 60 percent of the vocabulary; the reason for this is that from the middle of the nineteenth century on a great many words and expressions were imported from the French language, and thereby the Romanian tongue became “re-Latinized.”

For a time after 1945 the Slavic connections of the Romanian language and culture were vastly exaggerated. For instance, great emphasis was placed on the alleged Slavic character of the Romanians of Bessarabia, which was reannexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. Today, however, it is quite accepted that words of Slavic origin from an adstratum. The spoken Romanian language, based on Latin, has been strongly influenced by outside factors, especially by Slavic elements that enriched and shaped pronunciations. The official languages of the Byzantine Empire that replaced Rome—or rather continued Roman traditions—were the Greek and Latin, and this fact favored the survival of the Latin tongue. Even today, disputes are still raging about the first surviving written Romanian words, torna, torna, fratre! (meaning “turn back, turn back brother!”) whether they represent a Romanian or a Latin expression. These words had been recorded in 587 A.D., when a soldier of the Byzantine army in the Balkans, near the town of Aitos, observed that a mule walking in front of him was losing its load, and warned the master of the animal. The Byzantine army almost succeeded in surrounding an Avar force, but the warning “torna” caused a general panic and everyone ran away. We might say that only the linguists remained in the battlefield! Some later researchers thought that the warning represented a military order, others, however, doubt the explanation, because the expression “brother” does not fit such a command. The short warning had, in time, become a metaphor, since linguists considered that it was a warning for caution.¹ In fact a great many memories of Vulgar Latin survived almost as a prelude to the development of the Romanian tongue.

The Romanian language has emerged in the course of the eight and ninth centuries, and it was indeed influenced by Slavic expressions. Romanians living north of the Danube called themselves Rumâns, and the majority of Macedonian-Romanians were Arumâns,
and later Armâns. But the outside world did not use these expressions. The German equivalent of the word “Roman” is Walach, and the Slavic voloh and the Greek blah came from this word. The origin of this expression leads us back to the Celtic volca, referring to a Celtic group of peoples that accepted the Latin language. From the Slavic voloh came the Hungarian oláh, and the plural of voloh means olasz (Italian) in Hungarian. The adjective “Romanian” (Român) is the only one that in today’s neo-Latin world harkens back to the people and language of Ancient Rome. According to the chronicle of Gáspár Heltai, written in 1575, before the Huns who, according to him, originated from the Scythians and who allegedly were the Hungarians, conquered Transylvania—as the generally accepted mythology proclaimed—the “land was occupied by Romans whose descendants, the Vlachs, continue to live in the forests and high places, and are nowadays called Románus.”

If we discount the origin-myths, the question that raises a lot of debatable answers is “Where was the ancestral home of the Romanians? What is their origin and in what manner did the Romanian people evolve?” Since the eighteenth century three theories have been offered. The first, today’s “official version,” proposes a Daco-Romanian continuity. According to this account, the Romanians originate from the Dacians, Getans (Goths) and Romans who lived in territories that today constitute Romania. Historical studies consider the names of Dacians and Getans as synonymous; peoples living in the Carpathians were called Dacians, and those living in the lowlands were called Getans. Dacia was not simply the occasionally centralized state of tribes of Dacian-Getan origin, but similarly to other states of that period, it was a conglomerate which included even Celts, and other ethnic elements. The degree of centralization depended upon the ability of a strong individual, such as Burebista or Decebal, to bring it about. The basis of the Dacian-Roman synthesis is the historical fact that the Roman Emperor Traian conquered the western parts of Dacia, parts of Transylvania, the Banat, and Oltenia in 105–106 A.D. These territories were then formed into the province of Dacia Traiana of the Roman Empire. But around 270, the province was given up and it was conquered by the Goths. Roman civilization then disappeared, but the Dacians who accepted the empire’s language, and the Romans who stayed behind, retreated into the mountains and survived the waves of the subsequent invasions.
The rejection of the theory of Daco-Romanian continuity leads to the theory of immigration. According to this concept, the ancestors of the Romanians wandered to their current homeland from the Balkans.

The third theory is based on the concept of “admigration.” It is the belief that there were additional movements of peoples to Transylvania. This theory attempted to provide a synthesis between the previous two theories. According to its partisans, Latin speaking groups survived in Transylvania, and were later strengthened by additional waves of Romanian migrants from the Balkans.

Archeological finds supporting the theory of continuity are questionable, and no written historical source exist to prove the survival of an aboriginal Romanian population, nor are there sources to support—or contradict—the idea of large-scale immigration. Besides linguistic theories, constructions and counterarguments, all these explanations are based on logical constructs and axiomatic convictions.

The “purist” theories are expected to be accepted on the basis of faith. We know of two versions of these theories. One of them insists on a pure Roman origin of the Romanian people. The theory was developed by the leading intellectuals of the Romanian Enlightenment, emphasizing their conviction that the proud Romans would not mix with the defeated Dacians, but rather they partly exterminated, partly expelled them from the land. Furthermore, Roman rule was too brief for forcing the Dacians to shift their language to Latin, that is, to Romanian.

In the twentieth century, the dogma of pure Dacian origins was born, and it was embraced during the Ceaușescu era, supported also by the former right-wing extremist, the expatriate Iosif Constantin Drăgan, who had, in the meantime, become a millionaire in Italy. As a result of the marriage of left- and right-wing totalitarianisms, the establishment of an institute of “Traciology” (referring to the Tracians of ancient times) was planned, but the Romanian Revolution of 1989 put an end to these efforts.

In Western and Eastern historiography that tend to be influenced by political science, the mistaken belief continues to prevail that only Hungarian historians reject the theory of Daco-Romanian continuity. Robert Roesler presented, however, an alternative theory as early as the 1870s, that is based on medieval and early-modern precedents, and is still being debated. Even today, the study of this professor of
linguistics from Graz, Austria, continues to present a challenge, to such an extent that it had not yet been published in Romania, and the name of the author is an anathema in Romanian publications. According to Roesler, 150 years had not been long enough for the Dacians to assimilate the language of the Roman conquerors who were themselves of mixed ethnicity. This was especially the case, since the free Dacians who were not conquered, continuously raided the Roman provinces, counting on support from their conquered brothers, and this makes the continuity of their own culture and their resistance likely. In the last half century of Roman rule, the Romans had difficulty in resisting the pressure exerted by the first great migrations, represented mainly by the Goths. The fact that the Romanian and Albanian languages have ninety (and, according to the latest studies, even 125) common words, argues for Balkan origins. These words refer to the lifestyle of traditional shepherds, and point to the close coexistence of the two peoples.

The unity of the Romanian language, the fact that every regional accent also shows the same Slavic influences, seems to indicate that the ancestors of the Romanians in Macedonia and Maramureș had lived together in the distant past. Another argument, according to which the more important local place and river names were not taken over directly from the Latin language, but were adopted from Slavic or Hungarian sources, also speaks against the theory of continuity. Roesler emphasized especially the fact that Byzantine chronicles and documents attest to the role of Romanians in the Balkans from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, while they appear in documents issued by the Hungarian kings only in the course of the early thirteenth century. He argued that large-scale resettlement began only at that time.

In the meantime, fundamental changes were taking place in the Balkans. In the sixth century the Slavs, enjoying the support of the Avars, settled in those parts of the Balkan Peninsula that belonged to the Byzantine Empire, and then nomadic Bulgars of Turkic origin have also arrived at what is currently their homeland. They began leading the Slavs, assimilated their language, and accepted Christianity in the course of the mid-ninth century. The Bulgar tsar received a crown from the Byzantine emperor. The Byzantine Cyril and Methodius translated the Bible into Middle Bulgarian, and therefore the fourth sacred lan-
guage was established, Church Slavonic. The large Romanian population, who lived by herding sheep, became an important element in the First Bulgarian Empire in the ninth century, because of their numbers and economic weight. However, after Byzantium extended its borders once again to the Danube in 1020, ending Bulgaria’s power and exterminating large numbers of Bulgarians, the importance of the Romanians further increased. They became a significant element in the Byzantine armies, often rose up against heavy taxation, and played a decisive role in the reestablishment of the Bulgarian Empire. At the end of the twelfth century, the Romanians led an uprising against Byzantine rule that resulted in the rebirth of Bulgaria. It is possible that the first rulers of the new Bulgarian state were Romanians; they were Asen, Peter, and Kalojohn. Their descendants, the Asens, adopted the Bulgarian language, since the cultural traditions of the state and church had been Bulgarian. The majority of the population also spoke Bulgarian. Roesler’s arguments did have an impact on Romanian historiography and Romanian historians were compelled to find response to many of his assertions.

Romanian historiography is unusually multifaceted. There are some historians who are adamant in presenting arguments in support of the continuity in Daco-Romanian history. The first great modern historian, Alexandru Dimitrie Xenopol (1847–1920), also embraced this theory. He confronted the issue of the unity of the Romanian language with the contention that the Macedon-Romanian and the Daco-Romanian dialects are two separate languages. This argument, however, was not accepted by the linguists. Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu (1838–1907), a polyhistor, explained the simultaneous appearance of Albanian and Romanian words by an alleged Thracian substratum, by the assimilation of a basic substructure into Romanian. He backed his case with the word *doina* (song) and declared that this alone contradicted Roesler’s argument. The word is actually of Slavic origin and is the basis of the Hungarian word, *dana*.

Roesler also pointed out that there are no words of Gothic origin in the Romanian language, although they should be present if the Goths, moving into the Carpathian Basin in the course of the third and fourth centuries, met the ancestors of the Romanians. In response, Hasdeu placed the Romanians’ original homeland and the ‘peoples’
“cradle” in the Transylvanian district of Hátszeg [Hațeg], and the southern slopes of the Carpathians, asserting that the Goths had not reached these areas and, therefore, there were no contacts between the two peoples.

Ioan Bogdan and Dimitre Onciul, both positivist historians, supported the theory of admigration. According to Radu Rosetti, the Romanians as a subjugated population migrated with the Slavs to the Carpathian region. Nicolae Iorga attempted to explain the Latinization of the region’s peoples by arguing that Roman settlers had populated Transylvania long before the armed conquest, that is, before 105–106 A.D. This theory, however, was contradicted by the fact that the Dacians had periodically invaded the Roman Empire, and this was the excuse for Rome to occupy the area with its rich salt and gold deposits.

Serious scholarly studies were conducted during the interwar years. The outcome of the most important of these was a monumental two-volume monograph produced by Professor Alexandru Philippide of Iași [Jászváros] during the 1920s. Its title is The Origin of the Romanians. According to this study, the Romanians occupied their homeland in two waves and replaced the Slavs. The first wave settled in what is today’s Walachia and the southern areas of Transylvania, while the second wave populated the Banat, the northern regions of Transylvania, Máramaros [Maramureș] and Moldavia. Philippide cited linguistic data. According to him the two subdialects of the Romanian language signaled the expanse of each of the two waves of settlers. He reasoned that, the Romanian people, a tremendous conglomeration, proved its vitality by its ability to assimilate other peoples.

A colleague of Philippide, Ovid Densusianu of Bucharest, also asserted that the majority of Romanians had lived south of the Danube. He called his colleague a “Roeslerite” although Philippide emphasized (differing with Roesler), that the Romanians settled in their present homeland by the twelfth century. Sextil Pușcariu of Cluj [Kolozsvár] promised a fundamental study of the waves of settlements in 1927, emphasizing his conviction that the “issue was permanently open,” but offered his opinions a decade later without reference to the work of Philippide. His views are related to the admigrational theories. The Transylvanian professor believed that the discovery of the ancestral homeland of the Romanians was a hopeless effort because it con-
cerned a pastoral people who wandered over huge distances, grazing their animals from southern Greece to the northern slopes of the Carpathians, and whose unity of language was the result of their mobility. Hungarian words, which are shown in the names of rivers (Olt, Maros [Mureș]), may be explained by the pressure exerted on the Romanians by the Hungarian kingdom. The arguments were then closed; by then, the disputes were concerned not only about the location of the original Romanian homeland, but also about the size of this hypothetical land; it could be as small as, for instance, the Skopje-Belgrade-Nis triangle, as Gustav Weigand asserted, or the similarly small area bordering Hațeg-Oltenia, a region where the Carpathians separate the lands of the Romanians as Hasdeu maintained, or the region extending from Thessaloniki to Maramureș.

The 1940s were not favorable for such discussions. In 1957, however, in spite of the officially enforced vulgar Marxism, new opportunities for research have emerged. Two outstanding Romanian linguists, Alexandru Rosetti and Emil Petrovici pointed out in two separate studies the unacceptability of the traditional Transylvania-centered Daco-Romanian continuity theories. They asserted that the settling of Transylvania by the Romanians began in the twelfth century and lasted for several centuries. The dispute was held behind closed doors and the participating historians (using arguments based on syllogisms) rejected the two studies. They approved the position of the Transylvanian continuity advocates, and the linguists were also forced to represent this position.

Already in 1944, influenced by the fascist Iron Guard’s ideology, the press complained that Romanian philologists were unwilling to declare their position concerning the Daco-Romanian continuity and “as a consequence, people who supported the Dacian theory had nothing to do with historical scholarship, and were influenced strictly by their own good will.” Since that time, the number of the supporters of the continuity theory has increased and the Communist authorities responded favorably to the complaint. Consequently, the theory of Daco-Romanian continuity became a secular faith in the service of national Communism. The propaganda machine used it as a means to parry the Soviet and Hungarian “danger,” “justifying” the marginalization of the Hungarian minorities in Romania, and the existence of
the dictatorship. The Dacian fighter, who was earlier the ideal of the fascist legionnaire movement, was now appearing as the archetype for the “Communist man.” The cult of origins, that has been one important element in the thinking of civil society, was turned against the essence of that society, which was the fulfillment of human freedom. The issue of “who was first,” continues to overshadow Romanian historiography. The simplifiers of the problem of the evolution of the Romanian nation limit the arguments to a Romanian-Hungarian controversy, while they argue for Daco-Romanian continuity in Transylvania. They are preventing the return of Romanian intellectual life to the vital reality of pluralism.

In the meantime, what has happened in the real world? What paths have the history of the Romanians followed in the Carpathian Basin where the borders of the Hungarian kingdom had reached the line of the Carpathians by the end of the twelfth century and began to expand beyond them?