

Romanian-American Immigrant Dreams in  
Anișoara Stan's Autobiography  
*They Crossed Mountains and Oceans*

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**Abstract**

In her 1947 autobiography, *They Crossed Mountains and Oceans*, Anișoara Stan, a Romanian-American ethnographer and folk artist who emigrated to the United States in the early 1900s, captures the challenges of pursuing her Romanian-American dream of creating an open-air ethnic museum meant to underscore the significant contribution of immigrants to the American culture. While she does not dwell too much on her own process of acculturation, she offers glimpses into the lives of several Romanian-American immigrants she encountered in various parts of the United States. Therefore, this article proposes a close reading of the fragments about first-generation immigrants through the lenses of social class and gender with a view to examining the ways in which they tried to pursue their Romanian-American dreams as they navigated the challenges of immigration in the urban spaces of the 1920s in the United States.

**Keywords:** first-generation immigrants, Romanian Americans, immigrant autobiography, Romanian-American dream, social class, gender

Anișoara Stan (1902-1954) was a staunch promoter of Romanian folk art and a folk artist in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Stan was a firm believer in the importance of

folk art as a way of maintaining ethnic and cultural identity; consequently, she worked tirelessly to preserve Romanian folk artifacts in the United States by delivering cultural lectures and organizing exhibitions to showcase the beauty of ethnic folk art and traditions in order to **to garner interest** in her more ample dream, the creation of an open-air ethnic museum of immigrant life in the United States. **She envisioned** a large outdoor ethnographic museum, with various ethnic households, where, in addition to admiring the displayed cultural artifacts, the visitors would also discover the passion, the patience, and the craftsmanship of the immigrants in the process of creating the folk objects. Peppered with expected and unexpected hurdles, the road to achieving her dream was an arduous one, and, despite her staunch efforts and unfailing determination, it did not become reality. Stan died before she could enjoy the fruits of her unfaltering labor, but her legacy lives on through the significant folk-art collection which was eventually donated in her name to the Ethnic Art Museum in Cleveland, OH, established in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Stan's considerable contribution to ethnographic studies has been acknowledged in a number of studies, such as Vladimir Wertsman's *The Romanians in America, 1748-1974: A Chronology and Fact Book* (1975); Vasile Hațegan's *Romanian Culture in America* (1988); George Henderson and Thompson Olasiji's *Migrants, Immigrants and Slaves: Racial and Ethnic Groups in America* (1995); Joanne Bock's *Ethnic Vision: A Romanian American Inheritance* (1997) and Aurel Sasu's *Comunitățile românești din Statele Unite și Canada [The Romanian Communities in the United States and Canada]* (2003). Stan authored two books, which capture her passion for the Romanian folk art and traditions in different ways: her autobiography, *They Crossed Mountains and Oceans* (1947), and *The Romanian Cookbook* (1951).

In terms of theme, Stan's autobiography is different from other first-generation immigrant autobiographies in the first half of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> because she did not focus directly on her successful assimilation into the American mainstream. Thus, I argue that it is primarily the story of her Romanian-American

dream, interspersed with brief instances of her own process of integration into the American society and encounters with Romanian-Americans and native-born Americans who supported her endeavor to different extents. Yet, in terms of structure, the twenty chapters follow a chronological order, with Stan briefly describing her life in Romania as a teenager, her family, and the events that triggered her dream, followed by an extensive chapter on life and traditions in villages in Transylvania and Romania, and then offering a lengthy account of her experience in the United States, revolving around her attempts to bring her dream to life. Almost twenty-five years after she emigrated, Stan chose to write her autobiography in English, and I argue that, besides the lectures she delivered and the numerous exhibitions on Romanian folk art and traditions which she set up across the country, by targeting English-speaking readers, whether native-born or ethnic, she may have employed her autobiography as another important component, a written testimony, of the journey to achieve her dream, a minute account meant both to illustrate the successes and failures she experienced along the way and to persuade her readership of the validity of her endeavor.

First-generation immigrants<sup>3</sup> still have a close connection to the home country and the ethnic language and culture (traditions, food, folklore) and are keen on preserving them for future generations. As a first-generation immigrant herself, Stan was drawn to the Romanian communities on the east coast of the United States, where she first started exhibiting the folk items she had initially taken with her in 1922. Consequently, the viability and success of her ambitious endeavor depended, to a great extent, on the reactions and support of the first-generation Romanian Americans she came into contact with during her itinerant cultural exhibitions. Therefore, she interspersed in her narrative snippets of the lives of first-generation immigrants; on the one hand, they were peasants from villages in Transylvania (whose families she was acquainted with back home), and they were her first immediate viewers of the folk-art exhibitions she organized. On the other hand, by describing their life in the United States, Stan wanted to show

how they had acculturated, adapting to the American way of life, but also preserving their “Romanianness,”<sup>4</sup> their ethnic values, traditions, and love for the folk art, a significant component of the Romanian identity, especially in the villages. The first-generation immigrants she met on the East Coast, mainly in New York City, NY, and in Detroit, MI, during her first years in the United States may have emigrated for different reasons than hers, but they had all set off on an arduous emotional journey with a dream in their minds and hearts. Therefore, this article proposes a close reading of the fragments about these first-generation immigrants through the lenses of social class and gender with a view to examining the ways in which they tried to pursue their Romanian-American dreams as they negotiated the challenges of immigration in the urban spaces of the 1920s in the United States.

### Anișoara Stan: Enthusiastic Idealist

Stan was born in 1902 in the Romanian province of Transylvania – *at the time*, a region fraught with complex political, social, and economic issues.<sup>5</sup> In her autobiography, she does not offer too much information about her family, about her upbringing, or her parents’ occupations. Yet she emphasizes the fact that she came from a respectable family of “intellectuals,” an educated family, whose male members (grandfather, father, etc.) had been “liberals and members of the Peasant Party” (31). Yet, although “they never occupied political positions” (31), her family’s social circle included important local political personalities. Stan’s dream took shape in her mind when, at age fourteen, she was mistakenly imprisoned in a camp near Cluj-Napoca,<sup>6</sup> on August 15, 1916, almost two weeks before Romania formally entered WWI on August 27, 1916.<sup>7</sup> During the dark days spent in the camp, she vowed that “I, Anișoara Stan, promise in front of our Lord, God, that as long as I live, I will be human and humble and try to bring people together, so help me God! Because in here, in this most inhumane place, in suffering and in pain, we are all alike. The same mouths, the same functions and the same flesh” (27). As a result,

her dream was born out of a strong desire to create a space where people of various ethnic backgrounds could display important elements of their culture, which, in turn, would foster a higher degree of understanding and acceptance of difference and diversity in a multicultural society. Being imprisoned together with other Romanians, Hungarians, and possibly other ethnicities as well, she became aware of the importance of mutual understanding, tolerance, acceptance of difference, and started thinking about concrete ways of putting her dream into practice – the dream of a large multicultural community where many different ethnicities could live together in harmony. Stan realized one way of accomplishing that was by showcasing ethnic folk art, and, given the wave of Romanian immigration to the United States at the time, she believed that the best place to achieve her cultural Romanian-American dream was “the land of immigrants.”

Stan was aware that her ethnic background differentiated her from the native-born Americans, and perhaps one of the goals of the autobiography was to show that this difference could have positive, not negative connotations. That is why, at least while recounting her first years in the United States, she embedded her individual story in the larger context of Romanian immigration from Transylvania. In this context, the title of her autobiography, *They Crossed Mountains and Oceans* could symbolize the physical and emotional hardships faced by the Romanian peasants in order to get to the United States and to achieve the dream of a better life in a country that offered them more opportunities to succeed through hard work. At the same time, Stan was one of “them”: she, too, had “crossed mountains and oceans” in pursuit of her cultural dream. To this end, in addition to mentioning her family background, her life in Transylvania, and her reasons for emigration, she included an extensive chapter on Romania, its history, nature, people, customs, and folk art, in order to highlight the qualities of the ethnic background of the Romanian-American immigrants and the necessity of preserving the ethnic cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup> Chapter six, with its minute description of Romanian village life, with its folk art, occupations, and traditions, as well as

with information on the history and recent politics of Romania (late 1880s and early 1900s) functions as a cultural bridge meant to connect the two main parts of the autobiography – Stan’s life in Romania and her life in the United States. On the one hand, this chapter offers American readers essential background information so as to understand the importance of folk art and cultural traditions (peasant folk songs and dances, or specific traditions on various occasions, such as weddings or funerals) as essential elements of the collective Romanian identity, closely related to the Romanian soul. On the other hand, this chapter might also have encouraged readers from other ethnic groups not only to learn more about the Romanian traditional values and culture but also to think about their own ethnic traditions and cultures and the importance both of maintaining them and sharing them in order to foster mutual understanding among all ethnicities, thus supporting her plan and main goal of emigration.

The story of her life in the United States comprises the larger part of the autobiography; yet this part also *includes* Stan’s frequent trips to Romania and sometimes lengthier stays there. A transatlantic connection<sup>9</sup> was crucial in order to put her inspiring plan into practice because of the extended ethnographic work she undertook in different parts of Romania to collect artwork and to garner support from the Romanian authorities as well, especially since all the work she did in both countries was in an unofficial capacity. Furthermore, the story of her Romanian-American dream in the United States can also be divided into two parts. During her first years – between 1922 and up to about 1928 –, Stan’s main aim was to lay the groundwork for her high-minded endeavor, and, accordingly, this part of her autobiography foregrounds her encounters with various Romanian Americans from different social classes as she set up exhibitions and delivered lectures on Romanian folk art with a view to persuading them to support her dream. During the later years, roughly between 1930 and early 1947, Stan’s goal was to turn her dream into reality, and the latter part of her autobiography focuses almost exclusively on her repeated attempts to create the ethnic open-air museum in different

locations (for instance, in Minnesota or New York state). On the one hand, she wanted the museum to highlight the significant contribution of first-generation immigrants to the American culture, and, on the other hand, the museum was meant to preserve the folk artifacts and traditions for the next generations of immigrants, as living ethnic history, fostering pride in their ethnicity and cultural heritage. During her physical and emotional journey in pursuit of her cultural dream, she came into contact with middle-class and working-class Romanian Americans, who responded, with more or less enthusiasm, to her ambitious plan. The first-generation peasants, many from Transylvania, nostalgic for their home country and village life, embraced her ideas wholeheartedly and became loyal supporters of her endeavor. Yet, her unflinching determination, enthusiastic belief in her dream and huge passion for folk art were not enough to persuade the Romanian Americans she met in their official capacities throughout the years. Belonging to the middle class, many of these officials, coming from different cities in Romania, including the capital, Bucharest, were more skeptical about the feasibility of Stan's plan to create an ethnographic open-air museum, more likely because she was not affiliated with any official Romanian institution or organization.<sup>10</sup>

### Romanian-American Immigration in the Early Twentieth Century

According to Wertsman, there were two waves of immigrants from Romania in the first half of the twentieth century: one between 1895 and 1920 – with roughly 145,000 Romanians entering the country – and the second one during and shortly after WWII (“Romanian Americans” 1505-1506). The push factors which triggered significant emigration from Transylvania (a part of the Austria-Hungary empire until 1918) during the first wave, included “economic depression and forced assimilation, a policy practiced by Hungarian rulers” (Wertsman, “Romanian Americans” 1505). Furthermore, Joanne Bock mentions among the push factors the high taxes paid on small plots of land in Transylvania,

overpopulation – which increased the negative effects of “the Romanian peasant custom” of dividing the land among the sons, thereby leaving sons in larger families without land –, as well as the competition caused by industrialization (5-6). On the other hand, one of the main pull factors in the United States was “the economic stability . . . , which promised better wages and improved working conditions” (Wertsman, “Romanian Americans” 1505). Yet, unlike other ethnic groups *which* emigrated massively at the time, such as the Jews from Eastern Europe and from the Pale of Settlement, but similar to the Italians from Southern Italy, many of the Romanian immigrants did not intend to stay in the country permanently; their goal was to make money, return to Romania and buy land. As a result, by 1920, as Wertsman points out, the number of Romanian American immigrants had decreased to about 85,000 (“Romanian Americans” 1505). Bock suggests that the Romanian immigrants of the first wave “fell into two groups. One group consisted of shepherd boys who had come to America either to escape being drafted into the Hungarian army or for adventure. The other, larger group was made up of male peasants who came to the United States seeking employment to earn enough money to return to their villages and buy land from the Hungarian government” (5). As far as the settlement patterns are concerned, Wertsman mentions that “because early Romanian immigrants were either peasants or laborers, they settled in the major industrial centers of the East and Midwest and took unskilled jobs in factories,” particularly in “New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana” (“Romanian Americans” 1506). In the places where they settled, “first-generation Romanian Americans established communities which often consisted of extended families or of those who had migrated from the same region in Romania” (Wertsman, “Romanian Americans” 1506).<sup>11</sup> This is the case of the first-generation immigrants depicted by Stan at the beginning of her American experience, immigrants who had arrived in the United States in the early 1900s, during the first wave of immigration from Romania.

## Romanian-American Dreams

In his book *The Epic of America* (1931), historian James Truslow Adams offered a general definition of the “*American dream*” as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement,” emphasizing that “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). Moreover, aware of the numerous immigrants in the United States, Adams also defined the American dream for immigrants, as “not a dream of merely material plenty” but “a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class” (405). Indeed, the experience of emigration enriched Stan’s life by offering her the opportunity to pursue her cultural dream. Thus, I argue that the poem she wrote and included at the beginning of her autobiography encapsulates her creed and her Romanian-American dream as a first-generation immigrant: “I love my *country of birth* / It gave me *life, vision, my creative ability* / For my ancestors’ blood courses through / my veins. / I love *America / The country of my free adoption* / It gave me not only *the continuation of life, new / vision and the opportunity for creation* / It *embodies all the freedoms*” (emphasis added). The poem reflects the close connections between the two cultures she inhabits as she highlights the most important elements of her hyphenated identity: “life-continuation of life,” “vision-new vision,” “creative ability-opportunity for creation,” and, in the United States, the country that “embodies all freedoms,” above all, the freedom to pursue her dream. Like Stan, some of the first-generation immigrants she mentions were courageous enough to

embark on the tough journey of emigration, with dreams and hopes of opportunities for a better life.

Since her plan for the ethnographic museum was targeted towards first-generation immigrants, both as participants and observers, she chose to include brief information about the life of either individual immigrants or families, who, for the most part, understood, encouraged, and supported her cultural endeavors. First of all, she intended to get acquainted with the ethnic, Romanian-American milieu in the United States, and, in order to familiarize as many people as possible with the beauty of Romanian folk art, she set out to exhibit folk costumes and other artifacts from her personal dowry she had taken with her. To start with, she organized exhibitions both in the private homes of Romanian-American immigrants and in the social halls of the Romanian-American societies, in New York City, in Detroit, MI, and in Cleveland, OH. During these ethnic and cultural encounters, she met Romanian Americans from different social classes – working-class immigrants in Detroit and more middle-class in New York City.

Thus, after including the informative chapter about Transylvania and life and traditions in Romanian villages as background information both for her plan and as an explanation of the Romanian traditional lifestyle, *Stan focuses on the description of the experience she had in New York City, where she arrived, accompanied by her sister and a female cousin, in 1922.* Letters from home were probably sent to various Romanian Americans in New York City from acquaintances in the social circle of Stan's family, asking them to take care of the three enthusiastic young ladies and help them to find their way in the new country. In New York City, they got acquainted with Bob Constantinescu, the consul of America, and his American wife, Tașcu Tănăsescu,<sup>12</sup> the secretary of the Romanian consulate, Ambrosie Neder, Vasile Cucui, and Joseph Moskowitz, among others.

Yet, of all the Romanian Americans she met in New York City, Stan chose to offer more detailed information on Neder and his family, and on Cucui. Neder emigrated in 1906, from Palos, Târnava Mare, in Transylvania; he and his wife were educated and

spoke several languages. Mrs. Neder, who “introduced herself with a graciousness so characteristic of our people” (165), left an endearing impression on Stan. She was impressed with their well-off lifestyle, but much appreciated that Mr. Neder, the owner of the “Casa Română (Steamship Agency and Notary Public),” was different from other businessmen, interested only in making much money and profit. Stan described him as a kind and honest businessman, ready to help anyone, running a business that “was like an embassy of the people, not an embassy of the government. Here the little man didn’t find superior airs but simplicity and warmth and quick help” (175), and by “little man” she probably meant the newly-arrived Romanian immigrants, with little financial means but high hopes for a better life in the United States than back home. The three young ladies were invited to Neder’s home, situated in the same building as his business offices and two other Romanian-American fraternal societies, where they partook of “a real Romanian dinner prepared by their cook Valer, a kindly Romanian man” (166). Moreover, the congenial atmosphere, filled with talking and singing (possibly Romanian folk songs), made them wonder whether they were really in America or at home, with Stan’s sister observing that “it must be America because we are eating bananas” (166). In New York City, Stan also briefly describes the encounter with Joseph Moskowitz, the owner of a Romanian restaurant on “lower Second Avenue in the colorful East Side of New York” (172). The dinner at his restaurant, and the subsequent Romanian-style entertainment – Romanian folk music and dances –, were heartily enjoyed by Stan, who was happy and proud that these Romanian Americans had preserved their ethnic identity and still cherished the Romanian culture and upheld the Romanian values and traditions. She did not mention it explicitly, but, in the case of the Neder family, much of the credit of preserving the Romanian ways was due to Mrs. Neder, in her traditional role as homemaker and preserver of the ethnic culture.

On the other hand, she was deeply touched by Vasile Cucui’s immigration story. A first-generation immigrant born in Cetatea de Baltă, Târnava Mică, in Transylvania, Cucui emigrated

in 1913 “because of oppression, because he wanted to be free of the yoke of Austro-Hungary” (173). She further explains that he emigrated “because he hungered to be a free human being, because he wanted to help his beloved parents and family” (173), his Romanian-American dream in a nutshell: Romanian – because he wanted to help his family in Romania (intent on maintaining the transatlantic family connection), and American – because he wanted to be a free person, free to think and express himself, and free to pursue a better life through hard work. Stan recounts the physical and emotional hurdles he overcame in order to emigrate. Living in Blaj, where he had gone to learn a trade, he heard about “America, how many had reached that dream country and made good” (173). In preparation for the journey, “he learned more languages, speaking besides Romanian, Hungarian, German and English, too” (173). Stan may have included Cucui’s detailed immigrant story as an example of successful acculturation, since he was one of those immigrants who had “crossed mountains and oceans” to achieve their dream. Thus, she proudly states that he received his citizenship (a noteworthy achievement, in her opinion) as a reward for “his honorable service during the war [WWI]” (174), and, afterwards, he was “a trusted worker” for twenty years at “the plant of Borden’s Farm Products Co.” in New York City (174).

As a first-generation immigrant, Cucui did his best to reconcile both sides of his Romanian-American identity: on the one hand, he was “an active member of the fraternal society, ‘Avram Jancu,’ the New York representative of the Romanian language paper, *America*, . . . and a loyal member of the Sf. Dumitru Orthodox Church Committee” (174). On the other hand, as Stan points out, “all this time, he helped to support his family back home and *even to send his nieces and nephews to school*” (174; emphasis added), another remarkable achievement, given the importance of education in Romanian peasant families at the time. Although Stan’s focus is on his story, she also mentions Cucui’s wife in passing, as “a very fine and pious woman” (piety being another important Romanian virtue), who stood bravely by her husband’s side throughout their immigrant life. Stan is definitely proud to

include this success story in her autobiography: “this is the story of an immigrant who two times endangered his life to become a citizen of America, when he rode under the train [in Romania, when he did not have enough money to travel to Bucharest and then to Constanța in order to board a ship for the United States] and when he enlisted to fight for his new country” (174). Perhaps Stan was impressed by his story because when they arrived, he was among those who waited for them when they got off the ship, and, at one point, he offered to lend them money for their expenses, a gesture which Stan graciously refused but truly appreciated, probably knowing that he was ready to share the little money he had with his young and enthusiastic female compatriots. She might also have been touched by his admission that their conversations had alleviated his feelings of loneliness and possibly nostalgia for Romania (he may not have been married in 1922, when they first met). Stan must have admired his resilience and undaunted spirit in pursuing his dream of emigrating to the United States when she exclaimed enthusiastically “I salute you, Vasile Cucui, honored citizen of the United States,” at the end of his story (174).

Upon arrival, in New York City, the three Romanian girls were treated with politeness and perhaps moderate encouragement, maybe due to the letters of introduction sent on their behalf. After all, they were young, naïve girls, in pursuit of an almost unattainable dream, but “equipped” with great passion and undeterred enthusiasm. Yet, unaware of the girls’ plan to stop in New York City for a while, the Selicean family in Detroit, MI, for whom they had brought a package from Florica Selicean’s mother, expected them sooner and worried about what might have happened to the girls. Hence, Alexandru Selicean and a few other male immigrant men from Detroit left for New York City to find out the reason for their delayed arrival in Michigan. “What happened to you, dear *Domnișoare*,” they inquired politely, “we promised your family we will take good care of you . . . When we got the package with the good things from home, we were hurt that you didn’t come instead of the package. Then we wrote in the best way we knew – please, *Domnișoare*, come here . . . we have rooms prepared

already,” adding that “Let’s hope all is well and no one has dared to hurt the *Jupânul*, the *Domnule*’s daughters ...” (171-172). Stan must have included the Romanian words deliberately in the written account (their conversation having probably taken place in Romanian), not only to add a flavor of authenticity, but also to highlight her family’s social status in the larger rural community at home. From the respectful way in which the Seliceans addressed Stan, her sister and cousin, one might infer that her family belonged to “the intellectuals” of the village, more likely middle class and certainly educated, as mentioned previously. Alexandru Selicean spoke with reverence of Stan’s father, whom he called “*Jupânul*” and “*Domnul*,” a very polite way of addressing a person with authority, and one might argue that, in this case, the authority of Stan’s father stemmed from his education. The same is probably valid for the three Romanian girls, addressed as “*Domnișoare*,” roughly translated as “Miss” (in the plural) or “young ladies.”

Therefore, after an interesting experience in New York City, the three young ladies left for Detroit, MI, where Stan was actually acquainted with one of the immigrants. There, they were received warmly by the Selicean family, first-generation immigrants from the Cluj area. Alexandru and Florica Selicean belonged to the working class, like Vasilie Cucui and his family. Yet, Stan’s focus was on Cucui’s immigration story, and she did not mention whether or not they had visited the Cucui family while in New York City, whereas in Detroit, they actually stayed at the Selicean family as they prepared their first folk art exhibition in the United States. Stan associated Detroit much more with Romanian immigrants than New York City, as her exalted description suggests: “Detroit! It is a magic name to the poor hard-working peasants of my native country and is known in the remotest corners of Transylvania. For those who by a miracle succeeded in reaching America news came, but more important even, was the reality, the money that started flowing back home to their parents and families to pay the debts . . .” (176). She further explains that, in Romania, the peasants

believe that there is such a place named Detroit, where, if one is fortunate enough to get there, then they know that that person is in God's favor. And they know from the letters that they received that there is 'Mori a lui Ford' – the mills of Ford, as they call the Ford factory, and it is interesting that the name they give to these factories is the Romanian word for water mill, only here they bring human beings to grind instead of the grain or corn (177),

alluding to the exhausting manual labor in factories as opposed to working, maybe equally hard, outside, in the fields of the home country.

In Detroit, Stan, her sister, and their cousin stayed in the Seliceans' house, which consisted "[o]n the street floor" of a "kitchen, dining room, and a small entrance hall from the street" and "bedrooms with separate entrances" on the upper floor (177). As Alexandru Selicean had told them in New York City, his wife, Florica, had prepared "the front room" for them, "simple and spotless, with three windows and whitewashed in a delicate sky blue color" (177),<sup>13</sup> much to Stan's delight, as not only the room, but also the inside of the house resembled a Romanian peasant home. "The beds," Stan reminisces, "were covered with beautiful colored Romanian bedspreads from Florica's mother in Ardeal [Transylvania]. She put out a few pieces, which she treasured, in our honor. The room looked so cheerful with the freshly washed white curtains, fresh flowers and a nice new sign – "*Bine ați venit la noi*" – Welcome to our Home!" (178). Stan was thrilled because that was what she had hoped to find in the United States: first-generation immigrants who honored their ethnic legacy and did their best to maintain the Romanian culture and heritage. "We didn't get luxury here, but we got something more precious than gold, *the sincere hearts of these good people*. . . . With all the luxury we had in New York, we never for a moment felt so earthy and so happy" (178; emphasis added), Stan admits contentedly. She mostly appreciated that fact that, although the Seliceans were not well-off, they had kindly offered them accommodation while in Detroit, and also the fact that five of the immigrant men who boarded with the family had graciously offered the young ladies

their room for the duration of their stay, both generous gestures, which Stan associated with the helpful nature of Romanian peasants.

As mentioned by numerous scholars, taking in boarders was a common practice for first-generation immigrant families.<sup>14</sup> The immigrant wives were in charge of the household, and having boarders helped the family in many ways. Florica Selicean apologized for their lack of bathroom and told Stan that they would buy a new bathtub for the girls to bathe in as she considered that their old bathtub was not good enough since it had been also used by the boarders. “You know this room is rented to five men. They sleep here in those two beds. This way they pay less rent and we can save more, as we came here to save to meet our responsibilities. The men were so nice to give up their room and sleep with the other boys. We have a few of them and we share expenses. I cook and wash for all of them” (178), Florica Selicean explained. She added that she was very happy to have the girls in her home, as she admitted that they, like Vasilie Cucui in New York City, “are all a little lonesome and homesick” (178). One might argue that, besides being homesick, Florica Selicean, having to take care of her husband, a baby daughter, and the boarders, also craved female companionship, which the girls’ presence probably managed to offer for a short while.

The Seliceans and their boarders certainly wanted to make a good impression so that, when Stan would eventually return to Romania, perhaps for a visit, she would tell her parents and Florica’s parents how well they had been treated in Detroit, and how the immigrants had not forgotten their Romanian values, traditions and polite manners. In this context, during their first dinner in the Selicean household, the men patiently waited for the girls, who, exhausted from the trip, had fallen asleep: “There was a house full of people waiting for us. With their fine understanding, they waited without taking a drink or a bite of bread, as they say, waited though their bodies were tired from their long day’s work, not wanting to touch a thing, until the *Domnișoarele* will come down” (179). Furthermore, “[w]hen we appeared in the doorway, they all got up, straightened their tired bodies and greeted us with

much grace and nobility. Again, they welcomed us to their home, offered us all they have and asked us to please not to be worried, as they are here to take care of us. They were all clean shaven and very neat in their clean shirts and clothes” (179), instances of polite acknowledgement of the girls’ social class, but also a respectful nod to their gender.

As mentioned previously, especially in first-generation immigrant families, the wives were expected not only to take care of the household and raise the children but also to preserve the ethnic ways, a fact illustrated in the Selicean home as well. Thus, Stan was delighted with the Romanian meal they shared for dinner: “chicken soup with thin home-made noodles, yellow like gold from so many eggs, stuffed sour cabbage, breaded fried chicken and crepe suzettes” (180). Yet, she also points out a difference between the Romanian and American dinner habits: “Of course, a glass of wine was served, then fruit, but no coffee, *as we do not drink coffee after our meals*” (180; emphasis added). Moreover, an unusual instance caught the girls’ attention after dinner, when a few of the young boarders started helping their landlady to wash the dishes, something the girls were not used to – men helping in the kitchen. It might be interpreted as a polite gesture of the young men to show their appreciation for Florica Selicean’s hard work to make them feel as comfortable as possible in the new country or perhaps even a subtle sign that, for the young generation (presumably unmarried young men, in this case), the traditional gender roles were slowly changing. As expected, the dinner ended with Alexandru Selicean singing beautiful “*doinas*,” traditional Romanian folk songs and with all of them dancing Romanian traditional folk dances. Although Stan does not mention it explicitly, staying with the Seliceans also alleviated her own, often understated, feelings of homesickness.

Being in a working-class environment in Detroit made Stan think more about the sacrifices the Romanian peasants had to make in order to have a somewhat better life in the United States. Thus, she noticed how the men, “immigrant peasants, who are agricultural folk, were being transformed into laborers for Ford, Chrysler, Park

Davies, Allis Chalmers and Goodyear Rubber” (180). As far as their living conditions were concerned, referring to the Selicean family, she pointed out that “[t]hey lived in a poor section, mixed with colored people, cold company flats in a very run-down condition, no electric lights, no running water, no bathrooms and for heat, coal stoves! These houses are colder than the houses in the old country. . . . they live a very hard and primitive life here too” (181-182). A huge difference, indeed, between the lives of working-class Romanian immigrants in Detroit and the lifestyle of the Romanian-American middle class in New York City.

And their Romanian-American dreams also differed greatly. From Stan’s description, it appears that, possibly through hard work, Ambrozie Neder had managed to have his own successful business, a nice house, and a family living in comfort, thereby having achieved the American dream. Furthermore, one might argue that the Romanian part of his dream was to help as many new Romanian immigrants as he could to settle in the new country, perhaps to find jobs, housing, etc. On the other hand, based on the information in Stan’s account, Cucui may have belonged to the upper working class, with a slightly higher social status than the Seliceans. But, the Romanian-American dream of both families was to lead a decent life in the United States, to save money and help their families in Romania as much as they could. In this context, while in Detroit, Stan thinks about how the hearts of the first-generation immigrants “are torn to pieces and full of longing for their loved ones left behind. And if they want to put away something, they must live very plain and deprive themselves of so many things, especially their privacy, as quite a few people live in every room to save on the rent” (181). The only small consolation is that “they can have each other’s company and not feel so God forsaken alone” (181), as they speak Romanian at home, eat Romanian meals, and observe the Romanian Orthodox religious holidays together. At the same time, she underscores the fact that there is a very high emotional and physical price first-generation immigrants have to pay “for their freedom and for the aid they give their families in the old country. . . . Gone are their ruddy cheeks

and the vigor of their bodies. They live in barren walls, yet they never complain, are contented and very loyal to this country of their dreams, America” (181). They believe that it is a worthy sacrifice because they hope that “we know what we are working for and in our old days, we will have a piece of land and a little house without debts and we can help our children, too, to go to school, so that . . . their lives will be a little easier. We live a nice life thanks to the Almighty God!” (181). Again, for many Romanian immigrants who were illiterate or had very little education, it was important that their children should be able to get a good education as an essential condition for better jobs and a better life.

Florica Selicean was acutely aware of the poor conditions they lived in, and one day she told Stan apologetically: “We could move to a nicer neighborhood and a steam heated flat; but then we would have to buy furniture and our expenses would be too high. We are all right here, we got used to it”; yet, if Stan considered that the area where they lived was unsuitable “for the kind of work you want to do and the kind of people you will have to meet,” the Selicean family did not want “to stay in the way of your success with your exhibitions and lectures” (181). And she was very happy when Stan and her cousin assured her that they would stay with them while in Detroit as “we are proud of you people” (181), proud how, despite the harsh conditions, the Seliceans managed to live a decent Romanian-American life there. Furthermore, the moral support and enthusiastic encouragement received from the Seliceans and from the members of the Romanian-American community in Detroit, together with Stan’s, her sister’s and cousin’s assiduous work, contributed to the resounding success of Stan’s first exhibition, motivating her to continue her cultural endeavor.

Stan included the stories of Vasilie Cucui and of the Selicean family because they were relevant examples of first-generation immigrants who had experienced in their home villages the traditions and rural lifestyle she was determined to promote and bring to life in the United States. She believed that the folk art and traditions were an intricate part of rural life, and she wanted to

illustrate how the former Romanian peasants, now first-generation Romanian Americans, worked hard in American factories, but still held on to their ethnic ties and appreciated the traditional folk art that reminded them of home. Stan was happy to realize that they were still proud of their ethnic heritage, determined to maintain the Romanian spirit alive at home and in the larger Romanian ethnic communities, as they tried to achieve their Romanian-American dreams with patience and perseverance. While the Romanian-American dreams of many first-generation immigrants revolved around living *a better life in the United States* and saving money in order *to help their families have a decent life in Romania*, Stan's cultural dream was to take the *Romanian folk art to the United States* so as to highlight the valuable contribution of immigrants to the American society and culture. And, though in an unofficial capacity, Stan was one of the most ardent and dedicated cultural ambassadors of Romanian Americans in the first half of the twentieth century.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "The Romanian Museum at St. Mary's Romanian Orthodox Church is the only such museum in the United States that features Romanian art and culture. The original collection of artifacts in the Museum was brought to the United States in 1923 by Anișoara Stan, a protegee of Queen Marie of Romania. After being exhibited in many parts of the country it was donated to St. Mary's Romanian Orthodox Church of Cleveland, Ohio" ("Romanian Museum").

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Jacob Riis, *The Making of an American* (1901); Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912); Marcus Eli Ravage, *An American in the Making* (1917); Edward Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920); Louis Adamic, *My America* (1938).

<sup>3</sup> "The 'first' generation of immigrants [are those] who migrate as adults and the 'second' generation [are] native-born persons of foreign parentage" (Rumbaut 983).

<sup>4</sup> For definitions and instances of "Romanianness," see Culic.

<sup>5</sup> Up until 1918, Transylvania was a part of the Austria-Hungary Empire. For more on the history of Transylvania in the early 1900s, see Hitchins.

<sup>6</sup> Cluj was the regional capital of Transylvania at the time, an important administrative, cultural and academic center.

<sup>7</sup> It seems that the Hungarian authorities believed that Stan was the carrier of an inflammatory message – possibly a letter, or pamphlet – on behalf of a group of college students from Cluj, who were suspected of being “the organizers of a secret organization which carried on subversive activities among the Romanians in Transylvania” (32), and who had had dinner with Stan’s family the evening before she was arrested.

<sup>8</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Stan’s cultural dream, as well as of the chapter on Transylvania and Romania, see Iancu.

<sup>9</sup> For more on early twentieth-century immigrants and transatlantic connections, see Levitt and Glick Schiller.

<sup>10</sup> Stan had her plan copyrighted in 1942. See Library of Congress. Copyright Office. *Catalog of Copyright Entries*. Part 1 [B]. Group 2. Pamphlets, ETC. New Series. p. 50. “Stan (Anișoara). New York. Plan for an ethnographic museum of peasant art. Dec. 29, 1942; AA 418868” (Entry 2620). Accessed on 15 Nov. 2019.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Romanian immigration in the United States, see Hațeganu, Diamond, Bock, and Amthor.

<sup>12</sup> Stan did not to include diacritics for the Romanian words and names in her autobiography. However, for purposes of clarity, I have decided to use the Romanian spelling – with diacritics – for these words, including her first name Anișoara, which appears as Anisoara throughout her text, even in the copyright document issued by the American Copyright Department.

<sup>13</sup> At the time, in Transylvanian villages, many houses were painted outside and often inside in different shades of blue, possibly symbolizing the sky.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the practice of keeping boarders, see Nadell.

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