

Istro-Romanian Cultural Heritage: The Relevance of the Study of Endangered Cultures

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Abstract: - The Istro-Romanian culture is on the brink of extinction. We are talking about the culture of one of Europe's smallest ethno-linguistic groups living in the Istria peninsula, at the confluence of Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. The number of the group members is rapidly diminishing. The urgency of the research concerning Istro-Romanians culture is, therefore, obvious. So far the Istro-Romanians were researched especially from historical and linguistic points of views and a systematic study of their culture was never made. This paper comes as a possible answer to both the urgency of the research of this culture and, respectively, the need to create a basis for strategies to maintain the identity of the Istro-Romanians.

Key-Words: - Cultural Identity, Istro-Romanians, Environment, Way of life, Tradition and Modern.

1 Introduction: the Istro-Romanian Culture Research Urgency

NOWADAYS one hears a lot of discussions about endangered species and we are made conscious that we should find strategies to save them. But there are endangered cultures too and it is the duty of cultural anthropologists and of researchers of culture in general to caution and explain the significance and consequences of the diminishing of the cultural diversity, just like ecologists warn us of the risks of the diminishing of the biological diversity.

The two aspects are interdependent and it comes as no surprise the establishing, at the border between human ecology and cultural anthropology, of a discipline whose names are the proof of its border character: *ecological anthropology, cultural ecology, culture and environment*. Whatever the name, such discipline make possible the study of the perspective of joint culture and environment dynamic.

This paper proposes an approach of a seriously endangered culture – the Istro-Romanian culture. We realize this approach from the above mentioned perspective.

The Istro-Romanians are one of Europe's smallest ethno-linguistic groups living in the Istria peninsula, at the confluence of Croatia, Slovenia and Italy – see Fig. 1. They were studied by Italian researchers – Ascoli, Mateo Bartoli Vasilici, Petru

Kandler, Nerina Feresini – Croatian researchers – Goran Filipi, August Kovacec – Romanian researchers – Ovidiu Densușian, Alexandru Rosetti, Ion Coteanu, Sextil Puscariu, Silviu Dragomir, Ioan Maiorescu, Lecca Morariu, Traian Cantemir, Petru Iroaie, Radu Flora, Richard Sarbu. These researches were mainly historical-linguistic researches, cultural researches playing a secondary role. Among these cultural researches, interesting is the research on the Susnievita village, realized by Nerina Feresini.



Figure 1 - Istria and the Istro-Romanians:

○ - Geographical areas with Istro-Romanian villages

Studies concerning the Istro-Romanians had in mind mainly the historic and linguistic perspective

and only seldom the cultural perspective. It is imperative to gain knowledge of this culture now, having in mind that the Istro-Romanian culture knows a process of accelerating extinction.

Consequently, for most scientists the urgency of the research concerning Istro-Romanian culture is obvious. The Istro-Romanian dialect – one of the four Romanians dialects – is present in the UNESCO Red book for endangered languages. It is estimated that, if no change occurs, in about 30 years, there will be no more Istro-Romanian speakers.

Thus, having in mind its rapid disappearance, it is imperative to gain knowledge of this culture now, while Istro-Romanians still exist.

The project that is mentioned in this paper aims to be an answer to the urgency of Istro-Romanian culture's research and both to the development of strategies concerning the stabilization of Istro-Romanians communities, maintaining their language and, by doing so, of maintaining their cultural identity.

The first objective of the project concerned contributions at fundamental research in the fields of cultural anthropology and cultural ecology: observing and understanding the Istro-Romanian culture in view of investigating the complex relation between the cultural identity dynamic and the environmental (natural, economical, social, technological) dynamic.

Starting from the hypothesis that the process of construction – and deconstruction – of cultural identity takes place in close relation with environmental particularities and dynamic, this project will try to explain how and how much change at the level of the environment affect significant changes at the cultural identity level.

With the view to touch this purpose the research is based on the study of memorial material: folkloric narration type, life stories, cultural practices (the old tradition of the *zvonciari*, for example, worldwide known for their dances), commemoration and memory writings, the family memory patrimony and its integration in the public dimension.

The analyses and interpretation of the data obtained from all these sources allowed us to identify the value orientations of the Istro-Romanian culture. These have been completed with the explicit research of fundamental value orientations using a questionnaire based on research methods elaborated by Fl. Kluckhohn, Strodbeck, Salzmann in concrete scholar inquiries in the value orientation sphere of interest.

The assertion of the fundamental value orientation of the Istro-Romanian culture – social and natural environment are comprehended here – could represent an important contribution to the existing knowledge on the particularities of Istro-Romanian culture, its dynamic, as well as its congruence with value orientation of Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian and Romanian cultures.

The second objective consisted in the creation of a data base including oral histories, oral testimonies archive, historical sources (memorial, literary, images - including a documentary movie) concerning the Istro-Romanian culture and its environment.

This objective comes as an answer to two imperatives:

- the need to record and conserve data concerning a seriously endangered culture;
- the necessity of a data basis in view of conceiving cultural identity strategies as well cultural and economical politics and projects (cultural tourism for example) which will concur to preserve and, respectively, help regain the cultural identity of the Istro-Romanians.

Consequently, the Istro-Romanian culture is at the brink of extinction and there are at least two reasons why it should be researched: gaining fundamental knowledge and, respectively, identifying strategies to support its survival, to maintain the conscience of linguistic identity of Istro-Romanians and to help them to regain the cultural identity conscience.

2 The Istro-Romanians in Question

The scientists agreed about the enigmatic feature of Istro-Romanians. They represent the western exception among a south-eastern majority of Romanians (Megleno-Romanians Aromanians, Daco-Romanians) – Figure 2 - and the Catholic exception among an Orthodox majority. They are, also, the only Romanians without specific institutions.

However, their language and their culture resisted in the middle of a mass of Slaves, Italians, Germans, until nowadays. *Who are the Istro-Romanians?* It is a question which inevitably arises and concerns their name, history and culture.



Figure 2 - A map of the regions inhabited by Romanians/Vlachs [13]

2.1 The Name

Unfortunately, there is precarious documentary information about the Istro-Romanians. Among these, we must mention one from the 10th century: Constantine the Porphyrogenitus, the Byzantine Emperor, mentioned in his *De administrando imperio* the Romanized population on the Adriatic shores, that he named *Ρομαιοι*, since the Greek speaker Byzantines were named *Ρομαιοι*. Constantin VII recorded that *Ρομαιοι* called themselves Romans.

Another document, from the 12th, mention a leader in Istria which name – *Radul* – could be a Romanian one.

According to some historians, there are all the reasons to believe that those were the future Western Romanians appeared in the medieval historical sources; they would afterwards appear under the name of *Vlachs* on the same zones beginning even with the 11th century [24].

There are relevant documents according to which, without any doubt, the *Vlachs* had Romanian nationality. The first clear attestation dates back to 1321: in the Serbian chronicles, there is a mention of a country of the *Vlachs* in the region inhabited today by Istro-Romanians. *Vlachs* – also named *Morlachs* – were regarded by the 16th century Croatian writers like Simon Kozičić, Ivan Pergosić, Iacob Nikaglia - as being the same ethnical group with the Romanians from the *Trajanic Dacia* and regarded Dacia as *Morovlasca Zemlja* [7].

They are known by the local inhabitants as *Cici* or *Ciribiri* and, in Old Italian documents, they appeared as *Rumeri*. There is a legend that talks of how the *Ciribiri* got their name: transformed from the phrase *cire bire* - which means *hold it well* – the

story is that Istro-Romanians hauling coal over the Ucka Mountain to bring to littoral cities would be threatened by the strong winds called the *bura*, blowing from mountain. The winds were so strong they could upturn carts of coal or firewood and cries of *cire bire* could be heard.

The Istro-Romanians have called themselves *rumeri*, according to Ireneo della Croce, a historian from Trieste. In his *Historia antica e moderna, sacra e profana della citta di Trieste* published in 1698, mentioned people who, beside the Slavic idiom common for all the Karst area, speak also their own and particular language, which is similar to *Wallachian* and contains many different Latin words. He was referring to Istro-Romanians and he précised the term used by them in view to call themselves: *rumeri* (derivated from *romanus*, through a phenomenon present in Istro-Romanian dialect and known as *rothacism*: an intervocalic *n* becomes an *r*).

Today, the Istro-Romanians have lost from their vocabulary the self identification of *Romanus* or some derivation of it and they called themselves *Vlaf/Vlași* and their language *Vlaški* or *po našu* or *po jeianschi*.

Finally, we must emphasize that the name *Istro-Romanians* have been given by the scientists. This name reflects both the linguistic affiliation at the larger body of the Romanian language and the geographical distribution of the population in the Istrian Peninsula.

Thus, Istro-Romanians called themselves by endonym *Rumâni/Rumâri/Rumeri/Vlaf/Vlași*, called by exonym *Ciribiri/Cici* by Croats, Slovenians, Italians, and had been named *Istro-Romanians* by linguists.

2.2 The Language

Istro-Romanian is a dialect of the Romanian language. Among all the Romanian dialects – Daco-Romanian, Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian, Istro-Romanian – this last is the closest linguistically to the Daco-Romanian. It seems that Istro-Romanian split from the widely spoken Daco-Romanian later than the other Romanian dialects did.

Mainly, three are the problems that linguists refer usually to: Istro-Romanian is a dialect of a language? Which are its particularities comparatively with others Romanian dialects? And, finally, there is an only dialect or there are more Istro-Romanians dialects?

Although the linguists' majority's considers Istro-Romanian as a dialect of Romanian language, there are some that consider it as a language. More than that some others refer to Istro-Romanian language in relation to the extinct Dalmatian one, but given the fact that there is no linguistic evidence, this point of view is not accepted.

Among the peculiarities of Istro-Romanian dialect the most frequently mentioned are:

- *rhotacism*: the intervocalic *n* becomes *r* (for example, *vineri* becomes *vireri*, *bine* becomes *bire*, *lumina* becomes *lumira*). The rhotacism is used as argument in sustaining the unity between Daco-Romanian and Istro-Romanian. To illustrate we can mention Bernard Comrie of the University of Southern California, who found similarities between Istro-Romanian and the 16th century texts of a regional variation of Daco-Romanian present in Maramures county. The same opinion is shared by Martin Harris and Nigel Vincent.
- Italian and Slavic influences are present in vocabulary and in grammar; in fact, Istro-Romanians are bilingual and even trilingual.

Some linguists, like Iosif Popovici for example, appreciate that there are several types of Istro-Romanian dialects, not a single unitary dialect. The reason consists in the difference between the northern and southern area speaking Istro-Romanian. Speakers are divided into two geographically isolated groups: the first group includes habitants of Zejane, a village north of Ciciarija Mountains, while the second group includes habitants of Susnjevica, Kostrcan, Nova Vas, Jesenovik, in the south. Consequently, some linguists classified Istro-Romanian in two dialects: the dialect called locally *žejanski*, and spoken in Žejane, and the dialect called locally *vlaski*, and spoken in villages and hamlets on the southern side of the Učka Gora.

In contrast with this point of view, most linguists consider Istro-Romanian as a unitary dialect and explain the differences between its speakers by the separation of two groups by a natural border between them – the Monte Maggiore – and by the major historical impact of Italians southwards.

2.3 The History

According to most scholars, Daco-Romanians, Aromanians, Megleno-Romanians and Istro-Romanians constitute an ethnical union. What differentiates the historians concerns the ground and the source of such unity.

They are an old Romanian population, after some historians from the time of Dacia; others think that they might be descendents of Roman legionnaires, while other historians consider that they are more than a millennium old

Mainly, there are two theories concerning the Istro-Romanians historical origin and their relation with the Romanians block.

According to the first theory, the Istro-Romanians had not their origin in the areas that inhabited today: their native country would be somewhere towards the East:

- Some historians consider that they originated on the left bank of the Danube, towards Transylvania and Banat and they emigrated into Istria between 600 and 1000 years ago; as consequence, the Istro-Romanian dialect derived from Daco-Latin having originated in Banat, Crisana, Apuseni Mountains. Among the sustainers of this theory are O. Densusian, Al. Rosetti, I. Coteanu, I. Popovici. According Ovid Densusianu, Istro-Romanians are not native to Istria: "The primary issue is that the Istro-Romanian dialect could not have originally developed where it is found today" [6]. Namely, according Iosif Popovici, Istro-Romanians were natives of Tara Motilor and they came into Istria sometime during the Middle Age [20].
- Other historians had situated their origin on the right bank of the Danube, towards the river Morava, the Central Serbia or even Bulgaria. More recently, it was promoted the idea of a multigenesis of the Istro-Romanians: they resulted by the contribution of Romanian elements coming from all members of the Romanian block, from the North and the South of the Danube after the 14th [24].

The second theory - with S. Puscariu, I. Capidan, S. Dragomir as its main partisans - sustains that Istro-Romanian originated south of the Danube. It is argued by the continuity between the romanity existing in Istria during the Roman Imperial period and the medieval. "These ones were not totally dislocated or exterminated by the Slave mass settled there beginning with the 7th century, although it considerably diminished them" [24].

This theory was sustained mainly by the Italian and Romanian historiography. It is the case of Sextil Puscariu: "...It is more natural to admit that the Romanians are nowadays the last survivors of the Roman population that had lived in the Northern half of the Balkan Peninsula and in the Romanized regions on the left of the Danube... Whether the Eastern Roman Empire would last having a Latin

character, more Romanic languages would be developed. The invaders, and especially the Slavs thin out. What as Romanic people has been preserved are we, the Romanians... Conditioned by the geographical contact, by the similar social status and by the lack of a complicated political organization, with prosperous commercial and cultural centres, the cohesion between different pre-Romanian groups was so strong that the Romanian language could develop in the pre-Romanian epoch on the same great evolution lines" [22].

The above mentioned theories are integrated in a synthetic point of view according which although Romanians speakers in Istria can be found early as in 12th century, present-day Istro-Romanians are probably descendants of Romanic people who settled in Istria in the 14th century.

Either Istro-Romanians came from the North and the South of the Danube after the 14th centuries, or they are component of the Romanian block resulted from the Roman population that have lived in the Northern half of the Balkan Peninsula and in Romanized regions on the left of the Danube, their ethnical union with the Daco-Romanians, Megleno-Romanians and Aromanians is quite evident.

2.4 The Institutions

The scarcity of a proper institutional system is specific for Romanians from the South of Danube. But, in the Istro-Romanians case it can easily speak about the absence of the institutions which could contribute to their identity's preservation.

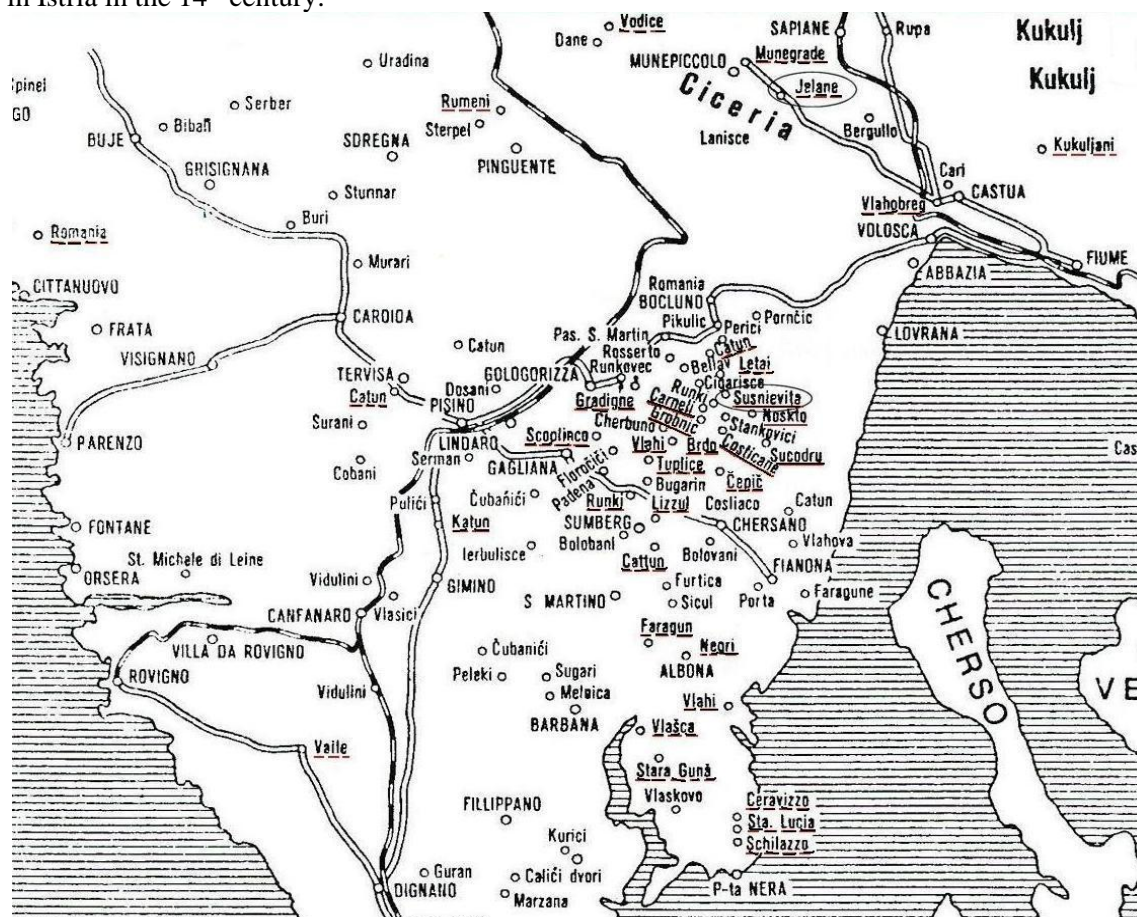


Figure 3 - Istro-Romanians: On this map villages where Istro-Romanian was spoken or is spoken are marked as follows: spoken in the past - underlined with dash-line, spoken early 1900 (see Vlahoberg, Romania) - underlined with full line (see Costicane), spoken today – circled (see Jeiani). (apud Sextil Pușcariu, 1926 [21])

Isolated and situated at the Western extremity of the Romanian block, outside of a personal national state, Istro-Romanians knew a continuous emigration. This later has had as a consequence the creation of a Diaspora dispersed on the European continent and outside of it.

The absence of a proper institutional system and of the national activity associated with the continuous emigration determinate a diminishing process of Istro-Romanian communities and of their own cultural identity. As we can see in the Figure, there was a dramatic diminishing of the

localities inhabited by Istro-Romanian speakers, especially in the last two centuries.

There were, although, some endeavours to establish a proper educational system, especially to the end of 19th century. In 1888 and in 1900, the Diet of Istria discussed the demands to organize a school teaching in the Romanian language. Despite the support of the Italians deputies, the demands were rejected. Only two decades later a school in Istro-Romanian will be established by Andrei Glavina.

At the end of the 19th century, Teodor Burada brought Andrei Glavina – one of the sons of Sušnievița - to be university educated in Romania. Becoming aware of the link with the Romanians, Glavina returned to Istria and founded, in Susnievita, the first Istro-Romanian school: the *Traian Emperor School*. This school operated between 1921 and 1925 in Sušnievița village (renamed, during the Italian regime of Mussolini, *Valdarsa*, after the Arsa Valley (*Valle d'Arsa*) region. The school subjects have been taught in the Istro-Romanian dialect and in literary Romanian language. At one moment this school had a number of 443 pupils from the Southern Istro-Romanian villages. The premature death of Andrei Glavina put an end to the teaching of Istro-Romanian in the school whose first mayor he was.

Andrei Glavina wrote, for the first time a work in the dialect Istro-Romanian: *Calendaru lu rumeri din Istrie cu figure lucrut parvea votea de Andrei Glavina și Constantin Diculescu* (The Calendar of the Romanians of Istria) in which documented many folkloristic tales of Istro-Romanians were included. It was published in 1905 and represents a pleading for preserving the Istro-Romanian cultural identity. Also, Glavina gathered dialectal texts and set up two vocabularies: a Romanian - Istro-Romanian and an Istro-Romanian - Daco-Romanian one.

3 Culture and Environment of Istro-Romanians

Istro-Romanians destiny is deeply connected to the history of Istria Peninsula. Because of its strategic importance – the exit to the Mediterranean Sea from Central Europe – Istria was, during its millenarian existence, the target of numerous invaders that tried to conquer it: Illyrians, Romans, Lombard, Slovenians, Croats, Franks, Venetians, Austrians.

Since the Illyrians confrontation with the Roman's Empire expansion, a pattern was established that would be repeated under subsequent conquerors: pockets of resistance in the hilly

interior. This pattern was followed also by Istro-Romanians that retired more and more deeply in the mountain. We found them in the inland region Istria around and on the hills of Monte Maggiore, in an area that comprises hills and valleys. This isolation was the price for preserve, until nowadays, their language, traditions, cultural identity.

Istria received a constant attention from travel writers and ethnographers. Some of them named Istria a certain *laboratory* of peoples, and even races. The Istrian example is often mentioned: a peoples' mixture had existed successfully and *naturally*, for centuries, even since Roman times [18]. Multiculturalism in Istria embraces nowadays Croatian, Slovenian, Italians, Istro-Romanian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Macedonian.

Situated in the centre of the Istria Peninsula, north and south of Učka Gora (in Croatian, Monte Maggiore in Italian), Istro-Romanians inhabit today two relatively isolated pockets:

In the north of Mount Učka, in an inland karstic territory, characterized by numerous dolines, called in Croatian *Ćićarija* (*Ciceria*, in Italian), the lone village of *Žejane* (Istro-Romanian *Jejăn/Jeinani*) with about 140 inhabitants exists. In this village, one can find the best preserved Istro-Romanian dialect, used as a mean of communication for the community.



Figure 4 - Jeinani village

In the south, on the western slopes of Učka Mountain, there is a cluster of Istro-Romanians villages and hamlets surrounding the shores of the Lake *Čepić* (now drained): *Sušnjeвица* (Istro-Romanian *Sušnievițe /Susnievița*) - the larger of these - , *Nova Vas* (Istro-Romanian *Noselo*), *Jasenovik* (Istro-Romanian *Sucodru*), *Kostrčani* (Istro-Romanian *Costărceăn*), *Letaj* (Istro-Romanian *Letai*), *Brdo* (Istro-Romanian *Bârdo*).

The remarkable continuity over the centuries of Istro-Romanian culture was due mainly to the

stability of way of life in an environment favourable to live-stock farming and wood coal production.

Istro-Romanians traditional occupations were: breeding and turning to good account of the animals, farming mainly for their own necessities (there is a rich terminology connected to the crop activity), forest (for their necessities but also for trade: the Istro-Romanians furnished raw materials for the Venetian fleet's shipyards), hunting and product of the coal by the wood's burning and commercialization at Trieste, Fiume, Venice.

Consequently, Istro-Romanians – whose initially activity was breeding - became gradually well known in Istria as charcoal burners, coalmen, vinegar producers and traders [4].

The Istro-Romanians – that many years inhabited an area between the Austrian Empire and the Republic of Venice - were exposed to powerful pressure: from the other languages from this area, who held, in turns, predominant positions – Italian, German, Croatian - as well as the pressures of a natural and economical environment, that is always more precarious.

The mountain, once covered with forests, pastures, lakes offered a propitious environment for the raising of sheep and cattle and coal wood production. Today the forests are almost gone; the lakes dried up or were drained, either because they were sources for malaria or when the tunnel across the mountain was built.

The traditional occupations disappeared. The soil in the area did not allow a profitable agriculture and thus poverty spreads.

The turn away from old forms of economic activity such as pastoralism, rapidly accelerated the pace of linguistic and, generally, cultural assimilation. Previously socially self-contained pastoral societies have modernized themselves, in some cases becoming urban societies. So, over time, Istro-Romanians became economically dependent and the relations with other peoples intensified.

In this new context, Istro-Romanian language was largely restricted to use in the family. On the other side, the increase of access to education and administration explains both the high level of assimilation of Istro-Romanians and the drastic decline of the traditional employment of the Istro-Romanians as shepherds and wood coal producers. As a result, the language became more and more economically irrelevant and it is also increasingly losing ground even within the family circle.

In absence of formal institutional structures, this stability of way of life in connection with environment contributed to the conservation of Istro-Romanian culture. The changes at the level of

ways of life and of environment are at the root of its decline. This idea can be sustained if one observes the process of population's decrease: the Istro-Romanian population, which was estimated at about 8000 in the 19th century, decreased to be 2000 in between the wars, 500 in 1960, 450 in 1994, about 300 in 2000.

The main explanation of this process can be found firstly in the migration but the mixed marriages had an important contribution too. Especially during the last fifty years there was a large migration from inland towards the larger costal Croatian cities - Rijeka (Italian *Fiume*), Opatija (Italian *Abbazia*), Pula (Italian *Pola*), Pazin (Italian *Pisino*) – and also towards Italy, the United States (Croatian linguist Zvezdana Vrzic estimates there are 200-300 Istro-Romanian speakers living in New York City – there are Ciribiri enclaves in Brooklyn, Astoria, Manhattan –and small groups of populations are living in Cleveland, Florida), Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

So that a great number of native speakers of Istro-Romanian language scattered around the world after the World War II, in Istria remaining only a few of them.

Consulting the 1926 map (see above fig. 3), realized by the Romanian linguist Sextil Puscariu, one can remark that nearly whole Istria peninsula was covered with villages with Istro-Romanian names – *Catun, Bolovani, Carbune, Sucodru, Costarcean, Floricici, Murari, Ciobani, Vlahi* – today, after the exodus of the mid of 20th century, there are only about eight villages on the northern side of the mountain – the biggest being *Jeinani* – and, on the southern side, a few settlements grouped around the village of *Susnievița (Valdarsa, in Italian)*. There are many localities with few Istro-Romanian speakers or even, like *Brdo/Bârdo*, with one habitant.

As a result, Istro-Romanian is today a severely endangered language spoken on the peninsula of Istria in north-west Croatia. The majority of the 250 or so speakers are middle-aged and elderly; many use the language only sporadically, and few children are learning it.

Istro-Romanian language contains today many Italian and Slavic words - it is an understandable fact considering the environment in which they lived for centuries, but, in the same time, the influence of Istro-Romanian on the neighbouring Slavs is evident. Usually, they are bilingual: they speak Croatian and, the older ones speak also Italian. American Istro-Romanians speak English, their American-born children are taught by their parents their maternal Istro-Romanian language –

which they use to communicate with their relatives when they come to visit Istria, the land of their ancestors.

The main reason for the decline of Istro-Romanian language is that it economically unattractive: it appears to offer no advantage in any modern, future-oriented profession. Thus, in the Istro-Romanian village only old people are active speakers (usually they are bilingual), those over the age of 40 are potential speakers, and the young men are making their careers with a little knowledge of the mother tongue.

Another reason is the absence of the prestige that explains the willingness to abandon the Istro-Romanian identity. It is the case of the young men that often shy away from their identity: to the suggestion that they are Istro-Romanians, they are responding that they are Istrian and nothing else.

Nowadays there are two types of Istro-Romanian speech: the northern, in Žejane and the southern in a few villages around Krsan (Crâșan), with a total of 250 speakers, which counts also the people that moved to larger cities. The most numerous are in Nova Vas (Noselo), Šušnjevića, and Jesenovik, in a smaller number in the villages of Letaj, Brdo, Kostrčani, Zankovici, Miheli, Drazina, Draga, Jelavici. According to the memories of the current speakers, Istro-Romanian used to be spoken also in villages Trkovci, Dolinscina, Perasi, Grobnik, Gradinje.

The increasingly small community, lifestyle changes, occupational changes in relation to environmental changes, the lack of schools in the Istro-Romanian dialect, the lack of a cultural elite led to a recede and even to the loss of the cultural identity conscience.

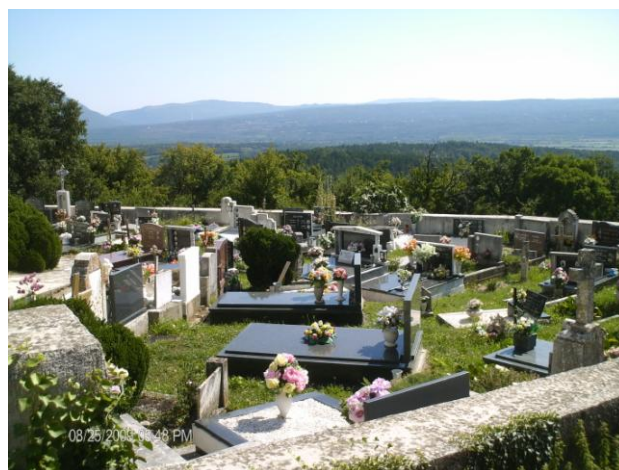
It is obvious that among these factors the first is the most important. There are more and more villages inhabited by a few Istro-Romanians, many houses are abandoned or converted in holiday houses by the ones that have emigrated. Such is the case of Brdo, the village with one inhabitant only (in august 2009), where the school and many buildings are ruined and assaulted by nature and, paradoxically, only the cemetery is flourishing (see the figures 5 and 6).

4 The Future of the Istro-Romanian Culture

In long term, a culture will have no chance of survival if it is not given greater appreciation and if its carriers do not identify a form of support. It is necessary, in consequence, to mobilize different

modalities of promoting the Istro-Romanian cultural identity, its specific values and traditions.

The recent resolution of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia represents a significant pace on this way. By this resolution, adopted on September 27, 2007, it was declared that the Istro-Romanian dialect is one of the most endangered cultural treasures on Istrian territory, and will be listed as a protected cultural treasure of Croatia.



Figures 5 and 6 - The school and the cemetery from Brdo, the village with one inhabitant

By proclaiming *Istro-Romanian as a protected endangered cultural treasure*, the tradition transfer to new generations through formal and informal education and inclusion of Istro-Romanian speech, as a mother tongue, into the educational programs is intended. Also, the revitalization of abandoned segments of this treasure and the protection of it to avoid the danger of extinction, destruction or commercialization is concerned.

Having in mind these purposes associations like that from Susnievita, *Association for cultural preservation and promotion of Istro-Romanian identity*, were founded.

Another remarkable initiative belongs to Doctor Emil Petre Ratiu. On the 29-th of April 1994, at Trieste he founded the *Istro-Romanian Association Andrei Glavina*. The purpose of this association is to preserve this society and this dialect. Since 1995 this association published books in the Istro-Romanian dialect, starting with *Calendaru la rumeri din Istria*. Beginning in 1996 they published the first journal in Istro-Romanian: *Scrisoare catre frat Rumeri*. Doctor Ratiu participated at the organization of a seminary (summer 2007, Trieste, main organizer Edvino Curtis) - which benefited from the presence of about 200 persons - Italians, Slovenians, Croats and Romanians - as well as an exhibition regarding the history, traditions and language of Istro-Romanians.

Such associations and also the two museums of Istro-Romanian culture - that are in course of organizing in Jeiani and Susnievita - are testimony of the Istro-Romanians' will to protect and to save their roots from extinction and might be successful instruments for bolstering Istro-Romanian self-confidence and for preserving the cultural Istro-Romanian treasure.

We can mention, also, that there is a serious movement under way by linguists, lay people and scholars from Italy, Croatia, Romania, USA, to preserve and document the Istro-Romanian language and culture before its few native speakers are gone. The project presented in this paper belongs to this movement. Another significant example is the endeavour to document the Istro-Romanian traditional ecological knowledge. Some research activities, developed in Jeiani, allowed the recording of about 60 remedies of the local folk pharmacopoeia, and mainly derived from plants [19]. The results revealed, once more, both that Istro-Romanian culture belongs to Romanian block and that it was strongly influenced by the Istrian cultural environment. So, the folk pharmacopoeia of the Istro-Romanians includes both elements of neighbouring cultures - Austro-German, Venetian, and Croatian - and a permanence of the original Romanian folk pharmacopoeia. The last one is highlighted by the uncommon traditions to use houseleek against ear pains and homemade vinegar from wild apple and cornelian cherries for diverse medical purposes [19]. The homemade production of vinegar is frequently mentioned in the Romanian folklore [17].

The common aim of these endeavours is to preserve Istro-Romanian cultural heritage knowing that the values connected with culture and heritage are highly significant for people's lives and need to be identified and highlighted.

It is useful to enlarge the interpretation of the term cultural heritage, in the sense suggested by Louis Loures: having in mind the unity between culture and the environment, cultural heritage can't be valorised without trying to analyze and interpret the value and significance of post-industrial landscapes and to develop new mechanisms to preserve it [14].

In the case of Istro-Romanians, their cultural heritage is connected with an environment which was used excessively in view of wood coal producing. Maybe, the chance of Istro-Romanian culture to survive has to do with the capacity of the community to initiate a process of re-development of this post-industrial landscape. A great opportunity is offered by tourism, given the fact that nowadays tourists seem to be greater agents for appreciation of Istria's rich history and culture in more measure than the main actors behind the history and culture themselves. Istria, with its rich and turbulent past, divided between Croatia, Italy and Slovenia, could become a transboundary *peace garden* [25], symbolizing peace between people and cultures.

In view of that public participation is imperative: it may encourage awareness of belonging to a community, sharing common culture and creating identity. It will improve community consciousness and responsibility while fostering a collective sense [15].

5 Conclusion

We can conclude that the constant decline of Istro-Romanians communities and culture can be explained by the existence of a complex of significant aspects: the absence of a proper national state, the continuous diminishing of population during the centuries, the "melting" inside the major populations (Slave, Italian, German), the continuous emigration and the creation of a Diaspora in Europe, America, Australia, the bilingual or trilingual feature, the scarcity or even absence of a proper educational system and of a national activity.

A team from Social Human Sciences Chair, University 'Politehnica' of Bucharest and from Anthropological Institute of Bucharest, initiated a project aiming to study and understand the dynamic of the cultural identity of Istro-Romanians under the pressure of environmental changes. The methodology of the project includes field observation, the research of value orientation of Istro-Romanians using the Kluckhohn-Strodbeck-Salzmann questionnaire, as well as a comparison of different sources and different records (written,

pictures, monographic). Information was collected using participant observation method and semi-structured interviews with Istro-Romanian speakers. The project was focused on a fundamental research dealing with the role played by memory in defining the cultural identity of Istro-Romanians in the dynamic relation to a changing environment and, both, the creation of a date base - which includes an oral history archive, historical sources, memoirs, literature and images – concerning the culture and the environment of Istro-Romanians.

We appreciate that this research activity is useful for the implementation of new cultural politics as well as economical projects, including cultural tourism. All of them are necessary in view of regaining the self-confidence of Istro-Romanians in their own culture and in preserving Istro-Romanian cultural identity.

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