A Research Project about the Romanian Immigrants in Turin (Italy)

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The research project *Romanian Immigrants in Turin. A Cultural – Anthropological Approach* was financed by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was intended for a 3-year research period (2007, 2008, 2009) as a necessary answer to several questions raised by reality. It is evident that in the last 20 years, namely after the change of political regime, the socio-economic, cultural and politic background have changed continually. The process of migration has become a major feature in nowadays' Europe and not only, so that migration in search of better labour and living conditions has become a phenomenon with a great influence on different levels: state policy, social organization, collective mind, concepts and habitual practices, ethnographic and folklore values. The two main destination-countries for Romanians have been Italy and Spain, besides, of course, Turkey, Israel, France, Great Britain, Ireland etc. Romanians came on several "waves" in Turin. First of all, came those who didn't know anything about Italian language and Italian laws, so everything was very difficult and even dramatic for them. After becoming aware of what they had to do there and they had a shelter and something to work, they asked their relatives or friends to come from their Romanian native country and settle in Turin. This time it was easier for the newcomers as they already received a helping hand to find jobs and shelter. Officially, there are about 70, 000 Romanians in Turin, but they are more numerous unofficially. The main jobs they are employed in are workers in the building domain and housekeepers. Because of the difficult process of officially recognizing the foreigners' university graduation papers, many alumni, especially women, work as unqualified workers, in their case as housekeepers and old people's personal care assistants. In the last 3 or 4 years the process of officially recognizing immigrants' university graduation papers has become less complicated so that young people have the opportunity of working in proper jobs according to their superior qualification. Yet we had also the opportunity of meeting and of speaking with Romanian artists like a painter who has a paintings gallery in Turin and a sculptor as well as writers and high-school and university teachers and professors, meaning that the Romanian spiritual life is representative and continually growing in Turin.

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We had the opportunity of talking with many Romanian immigrants who settled in Piemonte region after the fall of the communist regime in Romania. Our team was a multidisciplinary one: a historian, a psychologist, a socio-linguist and a researcher in cultural problems. On the first stage of our research, namely in 2007, we used questionnaires, while on the second stage, in 2008, we used especially narrative interviews and very few questionnaires. After contacting the Romanian local authorities we met the Romanian priests of different religious confessions (orthodox, catholic, pentecostal). We discussed with them in order to find out their opinions about different aspects regarding the Romanian community in Turin and we asked them to help us spread the questionnaires among the Romanians coming to church. They mentioned our activity after the religious ceremony and that is how we could get answers from many respondents. In the following year, in 2008, we appealed again to the priests in order to get people's acceptance to talk to us in front of a recorder.

Generally speaking, many Romanians in Turin have a satisfactory economic situation in order to give up the idea of returning home in Romania. This is more evident in the families who have taken their children with them or whose children were born there. It is very difficult to return in their native country while their children have grown accustomed to the Italian curricula and methodology in school. For the children born there it would be even more difficult to settle in Romania as they lack the ability of speaking Romanian like a native, they don't have friends in their parents' native country, in a word, most of them are foreigners in Romania.

Being aware of the danger that children might forget their own language and culture, the Romanian authorities initiated lectures in Romanian language and culture in Italian and Spanish schools using Romanian professors from Romania and not from the Italian or Spanish community. Today there are about 400 pupils of different ages who attend the Romanian language lectures in the schools of Turin. Another interesting initiative is the "Sunday School" in the Romanian Orthodox church. This means that children of different ages come with their parents to the church on Sunday morning and they study Romanian language, history, geography with different persons with superior qualification, even the priest's wife teaches them, while their parents assist to the religious ceremony. A special stress is put on teaching them Romanian folk customs with religious connotations like those during Easter or Christmas. The priest organizes small festivals with them on these occasions offering them an opportunity of keeping in touch with their native culture. We must mention that there are two trends, like everywhere, regarding parents' attitude towards the Romanian language: those who encourage their children to learn it and those who want their children learn only the Italian language, a goal for which they speak only Italian with their children although they themselves make mistakes as their knowledge of Italian is very poor.

The University of Turin has the oldest Romanian language and literature department in the whole Italy. Dating back in the 19th century, many students learn Romanian today, too, either studying it as a specialization in the Letter Faculty or studying it as a related field useful in their future when they graduate from other faculties of the university. Professor Marco Cugno and his assistant Dr. Roberto Merlo are the main specialists in Romanian language and literature in this department.

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Another contribution to the preservation of the Romanian language and national identity is played by the Romanian cultural associations in Turin. There are six main cultural associations who are very active and they organize several activities in this respect. The oldest one, "Frăția", who was founded immediately after 1989, organized lectures of Italian language in the beginning as the Romanians who came in Turin didn't know anything from the Italian vocabulary and grammar. This association had also the initiative of explaining juridical Italian aspects absolutely necessary for the newcomers who were not accustomed at all to the Italian laws and jurisdiction. Now, "Frăția" Association organizes lectures of Romanian language both for Romanian children and adults who want to improve their native language and not forget it as well as for Italians who are obliged due to official business relations to learn Romanian. Another association, "Carpatina", had as its main purpose to edit a bilingual Romanian-Italian newspaper, "Obiectiv", whose printing ceased in 2010 after 4 years of hard working to keep it "alive"; but a new Romanian newspaper took its place, "Ora României". Another association, "Bucovina", organized a Romanian library in Turin for the Romanian pupils who learn in this city. This was possible with the help of three institutions from Romania who initiated a Romanian book donation from individuals and from publishing houses so that 4. 400 Romanian books were sent to Turin. These three organizations are "A. Philippide" Cultural Association of Iaşi – the association of the researchers of "A. Philippide" Institute of Romanian Philology –, "Triumph" Rotary Club of Bucharest and "I.G. Sbiera" Library of Suceava.

Other activities organized by the cultural associations are painting exhibitions, photo exhibitions representing Romanian regions and ethnologic customs, festivals on Easter, Christmas and on the Romanian National Day, they also invite Romanian writers to come and read from their books and have a dialogue with the public, they invite Romanian theatres to perform theatre shows, they also present documentary films about Romania, a great impact having a series of such documentaries presented in a high-school where immigrants of different nationalities learn; thus they had the opportunity of understanding more about Romania. A private Romanian radio was another important initiative of another association, but it had to cease its broadcasting because of lack of money, as well as a TV news in Romanian which had the same fate as the Romanian radio due to the same problem: money.

The Romanian embassy is also organizing different cultural activities meant to keep the Romanian community united and to present foreigners a truthful picture of the Romanian culture and contribution to the European values in general.

Romanian immigrants' social life in Turin is very active. Being such a numerous community they have developed an intense trade in the market, namely "Porta Palazzo", the greatest European outdoor market, where they have large areas where they sell traditional Romanian food either brought from Romania or prepared in Turin. In this market everything is written in Romanian and there are many Italians who have become accustomed to some Romanian food and they come here to buy it. There are also shops in the city whose owners are Romanian and they sell such traditional food. One may also find Romanian restaurants in the city.

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Generally speaking, the Romanians settled in Turin preserve their identity as a people and they haven't broken their relationship to their native country and to their relatives from Romania. They return home on holidays and they help their relatives with money. But in most cases there is a feeling of "alienation" namely they re-adapt with difficulty to some realities they encounter in their native country although these were pure routine to them before leaving for Italy. This means that the civilization they have encountered in their adoptive country has become a marker on their demands and needs.

The attitude of the host-society is a positive one. All the Romanians we talked to in Turin agreed that no hostile attitude was shown by the Italian natives in Turin. As long as Romanians are honest people and do their work properly, they are highly appreciated by Italians. This attitude remained the same even during unexpected events when some Romanians did wrong things in different Italian regions. In Turin there was no adversity against Romanians. This is also a consequence of the policy adopted by the local Italian authorities. We had the opportunity of talking about such problems with the responsible with minorities in Turin town hall. Local policy is tolerant with immigrants and offers them the possibility of finding a working place.

The statistics displayed by The Italian National Institute of Statistics shows that in 2008 the immigrants' percentage in Italy on the first three places was: Romanians on the first place with 20, 46 %, namely 796.477 people, Albanians on the second place with 11,34% and Moroccans on the third place with 10, 37%.
The 350 questionnaires we used in Turin revealed that most Romanian immigrants come from the Northern Moldavia (the counties of Suceava, Iasi, Neamt, Bacau) which is a characteristic of the Romanian community in Turin.

On the linguistic level, an important aspect is the phenomenon of linguistic interferences that can be discovered on all language levels, the most influenced being phonetics and morphology. The questionnaires offered us the possibility of understanding complex processes like linguistic loans on a syntactic level, code switching, hesitations in a conversation strategy, unusual loans for the system of Romanian language. From a sociolinguistic point of view, linguistic interferences are obvious to immigrants due to their contact with the aloglot environment, a process during which the speakers' linguistic conscience gets more and more adapted to the new communicative conditions by accepting more and more loans from the target-language. Sometimes, because of the linguistic feeling of insecurity, immigrants reject their native tongue as they see it as a major obstacle for their integration into the target-society.

The 50 hours of audio records with narrative interviews form a narrative corpus with linguistic biographies that enhance the facts that can influence the dynamics of linguistic loyalty towards the native language. Romanians answered our questions in various circumstances, namely while being at the Romanian cultural associations, in churches, at home, or even in parks or restaurants. Those who accepted to tell us their life stories were professors, engineers, artists, students, workers etc.

As a conclusion we can say that on the identity level, the Romanian community in Turin plays an important part in the life of the host society, having a

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certain firm socio-economic and cultural foundation in spite of its recent settlement in this region. It is a real partner of dialogue for the structures of the local administration trying to find together and to put into practice different strategies for the immigrants' integration into the host society.

Unfortunately, because of the financial crisis, we were prevented from developing the third and final part of the project. Yet we had the opportunity to gather revelatory information and data during the first two stages of the project (2007 and 2008).

A Research Project about the Romanian Immigrants in Turin (Italy)

In this article we describe very briefly the objectives and the achievements of the project *Romanian Immigrants in Turin. A Cultural – Anthropological Approach*. Our research refers to the Romanians who left Romania for a better financial situation after 1989. We concentrate our observations on the Romanian community in Turin (Italy).

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