



## Săteni. A Diffuse Household in a Post-peasant Society

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To Frances Pine and her own *Sateni*

**Abstract.** An imagined “ideal type” village, *Sateni* portrays Romanian rural household changes after the fall of communism. The general frame of the story is based on a particular household I visited many times starting with the year 2000, dialogues and details being picked up from many other field researches in the Romanian countryside. The narrative is focused on household structure and relations, with fusions and fissions coping with societal changes, economic breakdown and new entrepreneurial opportunities as well as with work migration in the EU. The social history of the house itself, turned to a “pride house” by the elder generation and then to a “rustic house” by the younger one, depicts a general social trend of the post-socialist rural world seeking for “modernity” and of breaking up with the historical status of peasant.

The more theoretical frame is centred around the “diffuse household,” an ambivalent locative and occupational social category of the communist “household-worker” (peasant-worker) that emerged during communism as a result of work migration of former peasants to surrounding cities, and which is still functioning as a main domestic adaptive strategy. Nevertheless, individualism seems to gain terrain reshaping households and household relations into an ambiguous “post-peasant” society.

**Keywords:** household, migration, credit, identity, post-peasant society.

The village of *Sateni* does not exist. It is a sort of Middletown I created, the name that I gave to an imagined village in order to speak about a real household I visited many times starting with the year 2000. However, the description of this household consists of many other (more or less) similar households where I have done fieldwork for the past 15 years. Rather than a pure Weberian “ideal type,” the result is a dramatization of a kind of ideal pattern of *relations* in recent rural Romania.

## The village

Sateni is a big village with a population of over 3,000 inhabitants. It is placed at about 30 kilometers away from the capital of the county, with no railway near it, but linked to the town through a national road. Recently, it has been declared a town, though without having suffered any notable changes in its infrastructure or demography.

In the village, there used to be a craftsmen cooperative shop employing several hundreds of women living there. Men used to work in the town's industrial facilities, at a power dam near the village, and in the woods. There is also a nearby famous monastery which attracted, besides religious people, a great number of tourists. In this respect there was also a union hotel, always filled with guests, as well as a "recreation house" for the employees of the power plant. At present, the cooperative is about to close its doors and cannot provide any more jobs for the women of the village. The union hotel is deserted, the monastery bought the recreation house and turned it into a hotel. Enterprises in the neighbouring town are not undergoing major restructuring operations or have closed up, so only about half of the active male population in the village was able to preserve their jobs. About 20% of its active population was or is currently away, working abroad.

There is also a Gypsy neighbourhood in the village, which is separated from the rest of the dwellings by a river, as in most of the Romanian villages. The neighborhood ("Gypsy quarter") consists of about 150 households with an average of 5 inhabitants per household. The great majority of the locals are daily workers on construction sites. The household we are referring to is right after one crosses the bridge, the first house of the "Gypsy quarter." On the maternal line, the Apetrei family has been living in the Gypsy quarter for at least three generations, while men married in the family came from other villages. Still, the origins and older history of this kin is shrouded in mystery, as none of the family members with whom I spoke would talk about it.

## The Apetrei household

People know them as Apetrei, "of the Apetrei family." In fact, there are at least three families living under the same roof: Maria (who had died before my first visit there) and her husband Ion, also deceased in 2004 in a work accident, on the one hand, and their son (Marius) and daughter (Olga), both married with children, on the other hand. I said "at least" because the two separate houses of their old parents are across the road, one belonging to the mother, the other to Maria's grandmother. Now the two old women are living in the same house, the one near the road. When they have many tourists (Apetrei has joined the so-

called “agrotourism” network very early), they move in together, all of them or part of them, to live in the old houses.

V.M.: Officially, are you registered as one or more households?

Olga: What do you mean? As one household.

V.M.: But there are several families here!

Olga: There is one house. We are living here, the old women, there.

V.M.: So they form another household.

Olga: Yes. I mean they have two households: my grandmother’s and my great-grandmother’s.

V.M.: But don’t they live together?

Olga: Yes, they do now, but they each had their house and this is how it stayed... There are two houses there.

The fact that the parents live with their married children and their grandchildren is not a typical issue. But Ion wanted to build a big house ever since the beginning.

Ion: We stayed in one room. There was a big room and father [in fact, his father-in-law] was also working there, mother was cooking sometimes... Ever since I was a child, I’ve wanted to have a bigger house... When I started to build this one, there was a lady here, a doctor. I used to say: ‘My God, what a big house she has!’ I envied her! (laughing). I wanted to build a house bigger than hers, but I didn’t realize how much money would be needed for its maintenance and how much work was involved. But I did it. I was also the first one of the village to have an inside toilet. The lady doctor didn’t have one, so this was a big incentive!

V.M.: How did you figure things out at that time, what was the deal?

Ion: The garage was down here, where we now have the cellar. This was the working shop... We weren’t supposed to have any living space down there. And then I felt sorry. What was I to do with all that space? I could have easily turned it into a room... I made many changes. I still have the cellar. I haven’t finished the attic.

V.M.: What was supposed to be there?

Ion: (laughs)

Olga: Grandchildren, great-grandchildren... (also laughs)

Ion: We have everything ready, but the entire woodwork burned down.

Olga: And Florin died, the carpenter who was supposed to do the attic.

V.M.: And now what do you want to build up there?

Ion: If I manage to find the money, I want to raise a light summer building. If these young girls come here (we were with some students), I’ll get 20 of them there, to see the landscape.

Olga: We might build 6 upper rooms or 4 big ones, with a bathroom.

At present, the house has “6 rooms with wooden floors,” five at the upper floor, where they all live, one on the ground floor—between the “good room” and the living room which is reserved for guests—with a near kitchen where they all eat. The garage and the workshop have been transformed into a closets and storing space. Recently, these were turned into a large modern kitchen, with a dining room for the clients. The bridge, decorated by a nice wooden gazebo is yet to be finished. There is a big yard with a small orchard where there are some beehives, and a garden spot in the back, towards the river. The cows are kept across the road, “at the old women’s place,” where a larger garage was built when Ion wanted to raise more cows. Right after 1990, next to the road, the family built a small building where they opened a convenience store and a bar next to it. In 2005, Olga and her husband Marcel started to build a new house on their grandmother’s land, where they recently moved the convenience store.

In fact, we could talk about a single “domestic unit,” even though it is distributed to several houses. Its covering five generations is a rather rare phenomenon. However, “the old women” are not seen by the rest of the family as part of the same household. The reason seems to be one in particular: one has to share at least some work in the household in order to take part in the (re)distribution of goods and have a full member status, and the two old ladies are no more involved in running the household. Household is not only about kinship...

One of the first things that caught my interest in these people was the functioning of their “household,” more exactly what they meant by this. I first asked Mr. Ion if he saw himself as a “good householder,” as people say.

V.M.: Would you tell me if you see yourself as a good master of the household? I for one see you as such.

Ion: Maybe I was... But now I’m alone, my wife is dead, you can not be a good householder alone, like this, just by yourself...

V.M.: How can you tell if someone is a good householder? Can you see someone in the street and say: “Look, there he is?” How do you recognize him?

Ion: He has a garden full of flowers and trees, a well-groomed garden, he has a cart, a chariot, horses... Well, he has everything a man needs... A shovel, a small tractor... Some land... What can I say? I bought another 3 hectares of land and this Sunday I just bought 4,000 square meters of land.

V.M.: Is the house important for a good manager of the household?

Ion: Oh, yes! Very important. And its comfort matters, however modest... There’s no need to have a big house, and there are plenty of those who built themselves big houses, as I did with this one, and they are living in the old ones—as would be our old women’s house—while they are saving the new house.

V.M.: But this is what you did too...

Ion (laughing): That’s the rule here, one has to have a good looking house in order to be respected...

In a maybe more obvious way than in other cases, the Apetrei household was a continuing *process*, undergoing permanent changes, convergent projects and ongoing conflicts: “I don’t know if we are to be separated, we’ll see...” – Olga once told me.

## The characters

*Ion* came to Săteni in 1971, from a village of the same county. He was a hydro mechanic and was performing maintenance works on the hydraulic pumps of the county. This is how he reached Săteni, where he met Maria. Shortly after this he married her and settled in the village. “Three years I did nothing. I didn’t know what to start with,” he says. In 1985, he started to work in Săteni as foreman at a small water power plant in the region. He has four more brothers, one in Craiova, one in Cluj, one who left for Germany and another one who stayed in their old parents’ house.

Coming from a very poor family, Ion started from scratch. The house was his first and perhaps greatest ambition. Then he worked hard as a bee-keeper and even got a prize in Germany for his chestnut honey. This work brought him a fair amount of money during the communist years, and allowed him to round up his income as a worker. While working at the enterprise, he was permanently running his household, as most of the villagers. He also raised several cows and owned 20 or 30 sheep in the farming cooperative. Much to his help was the fact that he did surveillance work at the power plant. When he worked night shifts, he could sleep two or three hours and then have the entire day to work in the household. This was the reason why he never wanted to be promoted, as this would have meant more responsibilities, more work and therefore less time for his household.

After the fall of communism, he had initiated more projects than he could achieve. He was among the first who joined the “agro-tourism” network, while making a boarding house of the house built before 1989. Together with his wife, they built a small bar and a convenience store near the road. He turned back to his bee-keeping and, after a bad year when he lost most of his swarms, he started raising otters. They ate the animals and sold their furs. After this, he had some goats which he sold, then he bought more cows for whom he built a stable across the road, at “the old women’s house” (“Cows are a safer investment,” he concluded, arguing with Olga who wanted to invest in a pool for tourists). Ion made plans for a trout farm, and then wanted to install a heating central unit for heating a greenhouse and a sauna for tourists – and many more others. Each time I came to Săteni, he had other projects in mind. “This life is too short, too short to do all you have to,” he used to moan, half-joking.

In 2003 he fell off the staircase while he was fixing something, and died.

There is very little I know about his wife *Maria*. She had already died when I first came to Sateni and no one of the family seemed to be willing to talk about her to a stranger. Still, I know that she was head of a section at the “Domestic Crafts” small enterprise of the village, a business which was going very well when it produced many textiles for export. She supervised 40 women and was working a lot at home, thus being able to take care of the household, as well. Together with her husband, she must have earned pretty well, as both had jobs that allowed them to take extensive care of their household too.

*Olga*, Ion and Maria’s daughter, is a hyperactive woman. She quickly gave up her studies after 10 grades of elementary school. At the beginning of the ’90s, she left for Austria, where she first worked at a pizza-shop, then in a greenhouse where there were other young people from her county. “The lady owner had many connections. It was like in Romania. She arranged our visas with the police, she was hiring us almost legally, but didn’t pay any taxes. And she gave us smaller fees. It’s true, she told us that if we wanted, she could pay us all the taxes, but there would be no salary for us. Who could have said yes?”

In 1994, she met a wealthy Austrian who did business with the lady she worked for and they lived together for a while. “The first thing about him was that I liked his car. Poor man, he thought I liked him, but I was more interested in his car” (laughing). She did not work any more, as “he took me away from my job, he said he would pay me my salary, only to stay home and take care of the cats. (...) You can’t imagine his house! When I saw all that waste... I felt bad! This is one way to put it; in fact, I couldn’t care less! (laughing) The cat food would cost more than ours.” Then she came back to the country for the marriage papers. When she got back to Austria, three weeks later, she found her husband to be with a friend of hers. “I left for home. Why stay any longer? I was one too many.”

When she got back, she spent all the money she had earned in Austria (“I spent it so quickly!”), then she worked at a bar in the capital of the county, where salaries were scarcely paid. “But when I saw how much I made out of the tips, I told myself it was all right. One time for Christmas, when the owner wanted to pay our salaries, we all refused, bought champagne with that money and drank it together.” Here, someone from a neighbouring village introduced her to another Austrian. “He was pressing me to get the paperwork done. I said I would leave at once, I didn’t care about his fortune. I would work and make money. He also had some advantages if he married me: he didn’t have to pay certain bachelor taxes...” They were sort of married, but the Austrian would not let her free once Olga came back to Romania. This is why she couldn’t marry another Austrian, “a very rich but older one, a refined special person,” with whom she lived for a while.

I don’t know how and why she decided to come back for good. “I had had enough.” This is all she told me. Since then, she takes care of the convenience

store (for which she graduated “a one-day course, so that they could give me the license”) and the bar. When tourists come, she takes care of them, too, and her sister-in-law helps her. She knows everything that moves in “the neighborhood” and she “comes to terms with everyone,” as she says herself. As they keep tabs at the only bar of the “neighbourhood,” it could not be otherwise.

When I first came to Săteni, *Marcel* was Olga’s boyfriend. She was not officially married to the “Austrian” yet.

Marcel’s grandmother had saved a lot of money during the Communist years: she had two cows and would sell their milk and cheese to the village hospital, she made doughnuts and toasted sunflower seeds which she sold at the high school near her house. She left all her money to Marcel’s uncle. When Marcel asked him for money once, he told him that, if he wanted money, he had to work for them. He had a stable contract with Plafar, for gathering medical plants, so he sent Marcel to pick those plants up and paid him a little more than the official fee. Marcel got used to having money, so he quit high school and, right after his military service, he got married for a short while.

He had a connection that helped him leave for Germany. He worked for some time on the construction sites, as a woodwork assembler. This is how he met a man who was interested in doing business in Romania, in the wood field. Near Săteni there is plenty of wood (“Statistics say we can exploit wood here for another 80 years”), so they decided to open up a wood processing workshop in the village. “We had arranged to buy land here and to set up a stable working place for him to take orders only for Austria. When he didn’t have any orders there, he would work for the domestic market.”) The workshop would produce “doors and other home appliances,” but it did not work out. “I wanted to have a big business, and he wanted to have fun. These don’t go together. He thought that coming to Romania meant running away from duties at home.” As Olga would put it: “They come here for a week or a month, they say they do business, but all they think about is having fun and then...”

Marcel takes care of everything, he is in charge of supplies at the shop and bar, he transports various things for people. Sometimes he does small businesses but, ever since I’ve known him, not one that might be big or enduring.

*Marius* is the other child of the Apetrei family, Olga’s brother. In most of my visits there, he was gone, as he was trying to do business in Germany. He bought several cars, among which a VW van, but he got fooled and had to go back there for buying all sorts of spare parts, thus making many debts. His father, Ion, had to help him with a lot of money, which led to an unspoken conflict between father and son. Marius had other plans, but the results were scarce. Each time I spoke with Ion, he would mumble when talking about his son and say “he’s more of an idler.” I was not able to communicate much with Marius. Our first long discussion took place after his father’s death, when Marius was suddenly forced



to take over the role of head of household. He was much more relaxed and was saying reasonable things. He had bought a wood mill and was installing it: "I took the land and closed it and I prepared it. I started to bring wood in collaboration with somebody else. It's fire wood and I can still choose some pieces for other purposes. Now I'm chasing some contracts – at first only for timber. I cannot do more." However, he had the ambition to produce "solid furniture with Romanian traditional motives." The next time I went to Sateni, Marcel had made some progress with his woodwork business and was speaking like a true businessman who knows what to do. Therefore, I was quite surprised when, during the winter of 2006, when I passed through Sateni, I saw that his wood mill business was dying away (it was proven that the seller had fooled him and sold him defective machinery, which had become almost unusable). Marius had decided thus to get a state job, as he suddenly wanted "to have a safer job, even though less well paid." In this sense, during the summer he tried to get a job as a fireman, with a fair salary and a working schedule that allowed him to work more in his household. The "bribe" he had to pay in order to get this job was much more than he had expected, so he had to abandon the plan. Now he was looking for something else, without having a precise idea about it.

Marcel's wife *Roxana* is "the daughter-in-law" of the household. A quiet and modest woman, she takes care of the children and of the current chores of the household. Practically, she does not play any role in the other members' various businesses or in their projects. She may keep Olga's place at the bar when she is away. Once, during the summer of 2000, while being exceeded by this passive role, she decided to have a life of her own and got a job in the city, without telling anyone anything. In the evening, when Marcel found out, he beat her up awfully. I happened to be there and I saw the whole scene from a distance. Since then, Roxana is even more quiet and I was able to exchange but a few words with her. The others speak very rarely about Roxana. As in a *Zadruga*, the last woman arrived inside someone's kin is everybody's servant...

## The domestic economy of the Apetrei household

The Apetrei household is a typical *diffuse household* with its members working in and out, combining domestic and market resources according to opportunities and short term strategies. There were periods when this kinship network functioned on a dispersed basis in Sateni and Craiova (where one of Ion's brothers lived), in Germany and Austria, still keeping their close household relations. In fact, their different coping strategies keep something in common, a kind of *domestication of the market*, be it communist or capitalist. At present, Ion and "the old women" are dead and the relation with the uncle in Germany has been severed. But Olga,



Marius and their families are still living together and sharing the chores of the household, their resources, as well as calculating in common “their expenses, but not their income.” “We are used to this, it’s simple,” they explain. “We are helping each other, even if we fight sometimes.” However, there is at any time the possibility that this symbiosis ceases, a wish that both Olga and Marcel have expressed but never fulfilled.

a) *The social division of labor.* As Ion used to say, members of a household must work hard as oxen in the same yolk, drawing in the same direction. His children, Marcel and Olga, have chosen different directions. When they worked abroad, each of the children had their own plans, while the parents’ household was more of a “safety net” to which they used to turn to whenever these plans would not succeed or whenever they failed. Generally, Olga contributed with a large amount of money to building the convenience store and improving the house (although she spent her money repeatedly), while Marcel brought a van with which he helps carry products for the store and go to the village (even though his father had to help him several times with money, in order to repair the car).

After finally (?) having settled in Săteni, they got married and settled in their parents’ house. Then, the assignment of the household chores started to be more systematic: besides his job, Ion took care of the beehives, cows and other major chores. He was also the one to take the major decisions regarding the household strategies. Olga and her husband take care of the store and the bar; her husband is in charge of supplying them, while Olga takes care of potential tourists. Marius is driving the villagers wherever they need with his van and helps them set up contracts or negotiate. Moreover, he founded the wood mill business. His wife “tends to the house,” prepares meals and takes care of both families’ children. All members of the household take part in field works (vintage, mowing, harvesting). However, this flexible assignment depends upon momentary strategies and contexts. Thus, for instance, after Ion’s death, the children were assigned the chore of grooming all eight cows, which they refused to do, and sold the cattle. Still, Marius decided to take up bee-keeping and fixed the hives left by Ion, thus providing honey for his children and tourists.

The two women of the household have completely different gender status. Olga is more of a modern businesswoman, as in many instances and occasions she is the modernizing factor of the household, much more than her brother or husband. On the contrary, Roxana is a typical example of a woman coming from a traditional patriarchal family. Still, this assignment seems to be working, and Roxana gave up any struggle a long time ago and is now happy with her obligations and rights inside the household. Marcel has also definitely changed his status in this association, from the moment his father died, as he is the one who has now the final word upon the household decisions. Finally, as long as they were alive, “the old women” had no decisional roles and were not asked to bring any contribution

to the household work, as they would not be the subject of any special affection or respect. They were “properly taken care of” and nothing more.

As for the household expenses, they were and still are “kept in common.”

V.M.: How do you do it? Does each family mind its own business or do you share everything?

Olga: Well, we keep track of what each of us spent and then we split everything. At the end of the month we draw the line and do the calculations.

Marcel: We split the expenses, but not the income. Each knows what he earns, but expenses are shared.

Olga: We are sharing the same house, aren't we? (laughs)

Marcel: Of course we borrow money from each other when we need it...

V.M.: What do you do with “the old woman”?

Olga: She doesn't have any more money! We give her something from the store, we give her food or we take her eat with us, as is the case...

V.M.: As if you had everything in common...

Olga: Of course.

b) *Economic activities.* Opinion polls show that, when asked what they would choose between a poorly paid but secure job and a less secure but better paid one, three quarters of the Romanians still pick the first version. Ion gave the same answer when asked, although he had been a daring “entrepreneur” all his life. It seems that his son Marcel reached the same conclusion after failing at the wood mill business, and tried to get a “state job.” For Roxana, such a job would simply mean being independent from her husband's family. However, she had to go back to her household chores. This hesitation tends to become typical, but the most common rule seems to be picking an easier job which may allow people work in their households, still the most secure belonging.

After having analyzed the Apetrei household for more than ten years, I cannot say I have identified any medium-term coherent and consistent strategy. All their economic activities were envisaged and were possibly achieved according to how they perceived certain opportunities in a local restraint space or in a large global one. Thus, for instance, woodwork business was a recurrent theme in the Apetrei household, influenced both by similar local initiatives, and due to certain tempting international offers. Still, the success or failure of one or other of these businesses would influence their decisions upon other businesses in the family. Therefore, in a profitable year regarding “agro-tourism,” Olga and her husband closed the convenience store during the winter, as they thought “it was not worth the effort.” With Romania's European integration, they wanted to turn the bar into a more profitable second-hand store but finally gave up and re-opened the bar.

Like in most of the villages of the region, the stores of Sateni grant a sort of informal credit. Only one grocery in the centre of the village, owned by a

businessman living in the city, officially refuses to sell on tab. However, saleswomen secretly sell on tab—using a short-term credit—in order not to lose their customers. Obviously, Olga and Marcel make no exception. Only their strategies differ to a certain extent, as they adapt to the particular conditions in which they develop their activities. Thus, prices are at the same level with those of the village, while the maximum credit line goes up to one million lei over three months at the most. Bread is a particular merchandise in this case and is often sold at its production price, no one is ever turned away, even if the respective person has surpassed the credit line or period or even if he does not pay his debts. Bread is still seen as a sort of Christian charity obligation and does not suffer the strict regime of being mere “merchandise.”

During summertime, every Friday night, when daily workers come back from work, Olga and Marcel hire some fiddlers from the neighbouring village and take a grill out in the street. In such a good spot, right when one enters the neighbourhood, every man passes by the bar while going back home and few resist the temptation of entering and staying there for a while... Olga and Marcel are thus almost sure that they will recover the money spent by their families during the week. In certain cases, the family would rather recover its money in services, while their customers are working in their vineyard or doing other household chores, for goods purchased on credit. However, winter is a more difficult time of the year, as money is scarce, as most of the daily workers cannot find any work. Therefore, the couple prefers to sometimes close both the bar and store.

The other constant activity of the household is the “agro-tourism” business. Ion joined the official tourism network at the time of its foundation. At the beginning, there were about 40 households that joined the network, out of which 14 are now its current members. Only one is open on a full-time basis. Ion paid the necessary taxes and tried to take some money on credit from a bank, within certain agro-tourism development projects. The only time I saw him angry and heard him swear was when he told me about it. I did not quite understand what had happened, but it seems that setting up the credit file lasted for many months and implied many efforts. Finally, the interest proved to be much higher than the initial one. Therefore, the family had no results and has refused any idea of collaborating with a bank or other financial institution ever since. “I don’t want to hear anything about banks any more. They’re the biggest thieves of them all,” Ion told me during our first interview.

A similar outcome occurred in their relations with the county branch of agro-tourism. The Apetrei family is dissatisfied for different reasons: on the one hand, the much too high commission cashed in by the agency for the tourists lodged and the much too small number of tourists who reach them through this network; on the other hand, the fact that they cannot control the quality of their tourists. “I don’t want to see in my house whatever person they send,” Marcel once said

to me, speaking on behalf of the entire family. Another time they told me that they had kicked some tourists out because they were making too much noise, while they told others at their departure not to come there any more: “They were pigs, this is what they were! They thought that, if they paid me, I was their slave and they could do whatever they wanted,” Olga once explained to me. For them, tourists aren’t just clients. They must be “likeable,” “we must all feel well together.” In fact, their agro-tourism business is in-between household and pension, commerce and hospitality.

As they would like to have mostly foreign tourists, the young members of the household have imagined various modern ways to improve their pension, starting with a bathroom with Jacuzzi for each room, and ending with a swimming pool. They started by arranging a dining room with a TV set, apart from the rest of the house, which they kept only for tourists. As a result, no foreign tourist would eat there, as they all preferred having lunch with the rest of the family, in their joint kitchen. Sometimes Marius takes these clients—whom he calls “friends”—in the woods, for a barbecue.

c) *The community.* Olga and Marcel know the problems of every family in the neighbourhood. In the morning, the bar is mostly filled with women who come for a coffee and chat with Olga. Also, they tell her about their troubles when they ask something for credit, when one bad thing or another just happens to them. Men come mostly at the end of the week and would rather talk to Marcel, to whom they tell where they have been, what they have found for work and whom they sometimes ask for favours. Therefore, our two people know rather well to whom and how much money they can lend without taking too great risks, due to their intertwining relationships. Also, even if she mumbles each time, Olga is in fact forced to reopen the store whenever someone has an emergency.

Marcel helps the daily masons of the “slums” with their papers and contracts, when they do not know anything about them. Many times, employers take advantage of this situation and fool them, and this is why they go to Marcel for advice or for him to read the contracts before signing them. “They are our means of living,” he explains to me. “So we must help them, for they don’t know anything. Then, if they have what they want, we have what we want too...” Other times, he or his brother-in-law takes the daily workers with the family van to the villages or towns where they are employed, and they negotiate the price as is the case.

In 2004, the entire family was involved in the local elections. They had a clear objective: to defeat the running mayor who did not want to give them a piece of land as compensation for a part of their garden, taken away by the state for building a local soccer stadium. Ion had ongoing trials with the Mayor’s office for quite some time, but never obtained anything. After his death, his children pursued the matter in court and decided to defeat the mayor. When I visited them in 2005, they were very happy: they had made it. “I brought him at least 300 or

400 votes. That's no joke," bragged Olga, who seems to have been the head of the entire operation. There was a simple explanation: they told all the voters in the neighbourhood that, if they do not vote for their candidate, they could go and buy their things elsewhere.

In the winter of 2006 they were waiting to become the owners of the much expected land. For Olga, this meant above anything else a chance to "get out of the Gypsy quarter," which seemed to be her dearest dream, even though she did not speak about it at all. Only once, when one of my students said she was not sure she would leave for Italy with a scholarship, I heard her burst out: "Had I the chance to escape the curse of the Gypsy quarter!" The other members of the household seem rather at peace with life in this neighbourhood of Săteni.

## Epilogue

In 2012 I paid the Apetrei family a short visit on my way to the capital of the county. A brand new house was built by Olga and her husband on the new plot of land: a "rustic" house, much smaller than Ion's "pride house," with many flowers and a wooden cradle facing a large veranda also in wood. The beehives, abandoned by her brother, were turned to ornamental garden furniture. "I wanted to do something nice," Olga explained to me, smiling happily. "Now I finally feel as myself," she concluded.